MAY

Western Trails

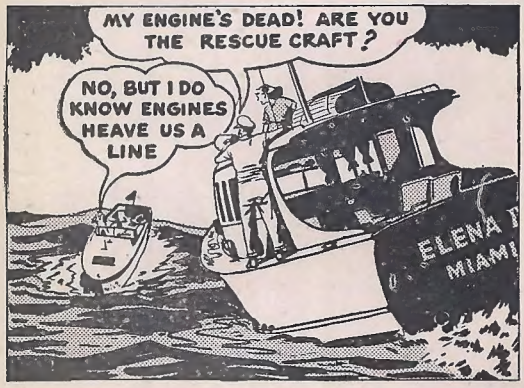
10¢

ROUNDUP OF THE PLUNDERING SHOTWELLS

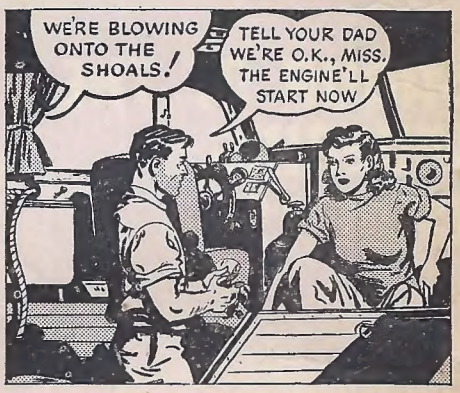
by
J. EDWARD
LEITHEAD

JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...

MOTOR CRUISER "ELENA" REPORTED IN DISTRESS OFF CATFISH SHOALS. RESCUE CRAFT • • •
JEEPERS! THERE SHE IS!
JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED NAVY "SURPLUS" BOAT, WHEN••



20 MINUTES LATER



WE PLAN TO FIX UP OUR TUB AND START A FISHING SERVICE
THAT'S A WASTE OF TALENT. MY CONSTRUCTION FIRM NEEDS MEN LIKE YOU
HE'S CERTAINLY HANDSOME

I'M PUTTING IT STRAIGHT, MEN, WHEN I SAY YOU GET REAL SHAVING SPEED AND COMFORT WITH THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING BLADES IN THE LOW-PRICE FIELD. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY, YOU'RE PROTECTED AGAINST THE SCRAPE AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

May 1947

Western Trails

Vol. XLII No. 3

An ACE Magazine

ROUNDUP OF THE PLUNDERING SHOTWELLS (Novelette) — J. EDWARD LEITHEAD — 2
Though a seventh son, Ira would be the first to hang for his brothers' crimes.

BLIZZARD BOOMERANG — JOSEPH CHADWICK — 21
Express-runner Andy Burke totes a special delivery in bushwhacker bullets.

TRAIL OF THE INVISIBLE HERD — KENNETH L. SINCLAIR — 29
Ray Landred plays one trouble against another to make a six-gun showdown.

SAY IT WITH SIXES — FRANK TRIEM — 35
This star-toter has a choice between lilies for an outlaw or flowers for the sheriff.

STAMPEDE — 41
Powder River Bill and his writin' rannyhans.

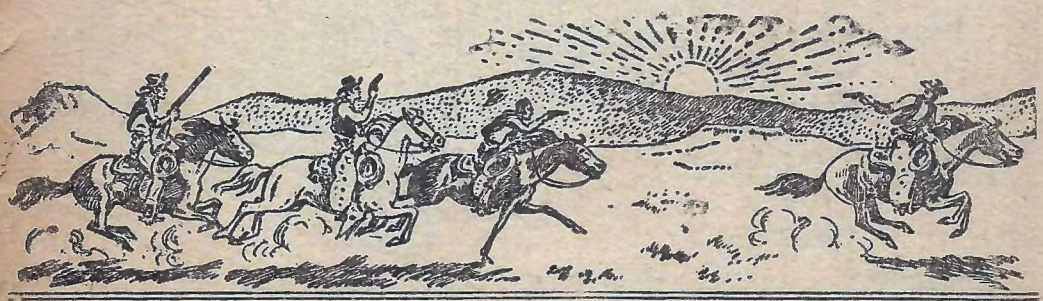
CALABOOSE CACHE — WILSON L. COVERT — 43
Con Bisbee has to head for the hoosegow before he can carve his dad a Colt memorial.

COWPOKE ON A PISTOL PAYROLL (Novelette) — D. B. NEWTON — 52
To earn pistol pay, Joe Welch has to take out a loan in bullets and bronc.

.45 MERRYMAKER — GIFF CHESHIRE — 64
This cowboy fiddler calls his own shoot-out tune.

FOUR HORSEMEN FROM HADES — WILLARD LUCE — 71
Ryle Partridge rides at night to pin the guilt on gold-mad marauders.

Cover by Allen Anderson



Published bi-monthly by A. A. Wyn, Inc.; office of publication, 29 Worthington St., Springfield 3, Mass. A. A. Wyn, president. Editorial and executive offices, 23 W. 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Entered as second-class matter November 14, 1928, at Springfield, Mass., under Act of March 3, 1879. Title registered in U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1947, by A. A. Wyn, Inc. Manuscripts will be handled with care, but this magazine assumes no responsibility for their safety. For advertising rates address Ace Fiction Group, Inc., 23 W. 47th St., New York 19, N. Y. Yearly subscription, 60 cents. Single Copies, 10 Cents. Please send all subscriptions and correspondence relating to subscriptions to A. A. Wyn, Inc., 23 West 47th Street, New York 19, N. Y.

This is an ACE Magazine

Roundup of the

Outlaw Novelette

By J. Edward Leithead

CHAPTER I

ROUSED by the clatter of hoofs in the Leaning S ranch yard, Ira Shotwell reached for shirt and trousers, dressed swiftly in the dark. He shoved a Colt in trousers band before heading barefoot into the front room. Ira had little doubt it was his father and brothers returning from the stage holdup, but it was always best to be prepared.

The Shotwells had been forced to leave other frontier communities because of their taking ways, so there was no telling when the law in Segundo Valley would pay them a visit. Bringing a few cattle

Plundering Shotwells

When the other six boys were all owlhooters, it didn't help honest Ira Shotwell to be a seventh son. Especially since he'd be the first to be strung up by law-riders if he didn't offer to swap brotherly bullets with his nightriding kinsmen.

and horses, purchasing a ranch site, to continue their bluff of being honest cowfolk, they had settled on the Segundo range less than a year ago.

Old Zenas, head of the clan, would have picked some other place had he known that their nearest neighbor, Perry Brantley, was to become sheriff at the previous fall election. A badge-toter was the last man that an owlhoot tribe de-

sired in such close proximity, but, so far, Sheriff Brantley had seemed to regard them as good range settlers.

Ira stepped to the door and looked out. He heard his father say, "Well, we made it and covered our trail good. How you feel, Hemet? Dang that other crowd for hornin' in!"

"I'm some dizzy, pop," replied Hemet, "but I can walk."

"Help me with this express box, Otey," said Zenas. "Beau, take the horses."

Ira turned back to light the lamp. His hand trembled a little as he put a match to the wick, replaced the glass chimney. Usually his nerves were under control, but the Shotwells had run into trouble of some kind. He was always expecting one or more of them to come home in shape for burying.

The lamplight illuminated a set, youthful face, darkly tanned, gray eyes and tawny hair, now tousled, inherited from the mother who had died when he was two. Just out of his teens, Ira, the seventh son of a seventh son, was not especially lucky. Born into a family that had always been at odds with the law, he had found it hard to keep out of the holdups and gunplay which occupied his father and brothers. Old Zenas had proved luck perched on his shoulder by eluding sheriffs and vigilance committees. He hadn't a single bullet scar in his tough old hide.

Ira faced the doorway as boots thumped across the sill. First came his father, tall and lean, almost patriarchal looking with his white beard, and Otey, the eldest son, even taller, his stubby mustache twitching as he looked at Ira. Between them they carried a strongbox, the lock of which had been shattered by a bullet.

Clay and Mace followed, with Hemet coming last, holding a hand to a blood-soaked shoulder. All big fellows, for the Shotwells ran to high pockets, not a runt in the bunch. Beau had ridden to the corral with the horses. Strom, the second son, would not show up that night. He had a job on the stage as shotgun guard, which made it all the easier for his father and brothers to frisk treasure coaches.

"How's the good boy of the outfit?" sneered Otey, dropping his end of the strongbox. "Sleepin' like a—"

"Never mind ribbin' Ira!" rumbled Zenas. "Somebody fix up Hemet's wound while I see what the take was tonight." The oldster looked upon Ira as an oddity, but the boy could shoot with the best of them. "If you'd been along, son, we'd blasted the daylights out of that other gang."

"What other gang?" asked Ira.

"We don't rightly know," replied his father. "They plumb surprised us, showin' up after we stopped the coach. One of 'em shot Hemet, and I killed the feller myself. Strom couldn't use his sawed-off, on account of hittin' us, but he downed another with his six. We finally got away with the strongbox and they didn't foller us. Well, it's probably our last stage holdup. The railroad has just about finished track-layin' and we'll start workin' the trains. Be a good idea for Strom to tackle 'em for a job as express messenger."

"How about quittin', pop?" said Ira somberly. "While we're all here and got our health."

Old Zenas glared at him. "Quit, when we'll have an opportunity to make even bigger hauls from them express cars? Not by a jugful, Ira! You never ride with us, never run no risk of a lead-scorchin', so why should you worry?"

"I reckon I oughtn't to," said Ira, "but I'm still a Shotwell. If I didn't have a family feelin', I'd 'a' walked out long ago."

"You'd just as well," growled Otey, "seein' you're no help to us."

"Who takes care of the ranch and does most of the range ridin'?" retorted Ira. "Not you, Otey. You'd rather wear a mask and frisk some feller who hasn't a chance with your .45 under his nose."

YOUNG SHOTWELL turned toward Hemet, who had sunk in a chair. As Ira removed his wounded brother's calf-skin vest and shirt, to see how badly he was hurt, Mace drew near. He had a weak chin and a loose mouth, his eyes were a watery blue. He shuddered when

he saw the gory state of Hemet's shoulder, bared in the lamplight.

"I can't look at it," Mace muttered, averting his gaze. "Sight of blood always makes me sick. We really ought to quit, as Ira says, before we're all gunned,"

"Don't be chicken-hearted like Ira!" snapped Otey.

"Mace ain't and I ain't!" Ira glared over his shoulder at the big, unshaven ruffian who took delight in riding him.

"Stop your wranglin', boys," ordered Zenas, removing hat and gunbelts to delve into the express box. "There's no cowards in this family. Mace is a mite squeamish and Ira—well, I've never quite figured him out, but nobody can call him yellow."

Ira slipped a hand under Hemet's arm to help him up, saying, "The slug bored through muscle and came out. Let's go to the kitchen, where I can wash and dress it."

When he had finished with Hemet, leaving him stretched on his cot in a rear room, Ira went back to the living room. Beau Shotwell had come in from penning the horses, was standing in line with Otey, Clay, and Mace while the old man passed out the money, putting aside two piles for Hemet and Strom. But he didn't offer Ira any of the loot, knowing his youngest son wouldn't touch it.

"This money here," said Zenas, beginning a third pile on the cover of the strongbox, "is my contribution toward buildin' the new schoolhouse at Barranca. Sheriff Brantley is on the committee. I promised I'd do my share, so that the kids from the ranches and around town will be able to learn their three R's. There'll be lots more youngsters, with the railroad bringin' families from all over."

For the first time since the owlhoot riders had returned, Ira's face brightened. "Bernice was tellin' me she's to be the new schoolma'am."

Otey snorted, "You and your girl! I don't like your bein' so friendly with the sheriff's daughter. Might let it slip sometime about us."

Ira glanced at him darkly. "I wouldn't, but I often wonder she don't suspect."

"And givin' away good money to build a school!" Otey went on, shaking his head. "Didn't know you were so public-spirited, pop."

The old outlaw scorched him with a look. "You that thick-headed, Otey, you can't see it's good business? Keeps folks thinkin' we're the right sort of neighbors. Same with Ira sparkin' Bernice Brantley. If we stand in with the sheriff's family, who's goin' to believe the Shotwells are the ones stoppin' the stages?"

He swept up the money and pushed the box into a corner with his foot. "Let's hit the hay."

AS THE Shotwells were finishing breakfast in the morning, a buggy rolled into the yard. Ira rose and glanced from a side window. "It's the sheriff and Bernice," he announced, causing chairs to scrape backward from the table.

"Stay out of sight, Hemet," said his father sharply. "No use havin' to lie about that shoulder of yours."

Ira was on his way to the front door as Hemet retired hastily to his room. Old Zenas and the other boys, lighting pipe and cigarette, strolled after Ira. Nobody noticed the broken express box still in the corner.

Bernice Brantley came up the porch steps, her father stopping to tie the horse. She looked small beside Ira as he opened the door for her, her oval face wreathed in smiles. A dainty hat topped her blue-black curls, which touched slim shoulders. Her dress was full-skirted, and a cameo pin nestled below the frilled neckline.

"Good morning, everybody!" Bernice called cheerily. "Dad's going to town, Mr. Shotwell, and as there's a meeting to discuss final arrangements for building the schoolhouse, he thought you'd like to go along."

Grinning in his white beard, old Zenas made an awkward bow. "I sure would, Miss Bernice. I have my contribution ready. Providin' eddication for the young

is our best bet for rearin' the kind of citizens who'll be a credit to us old-timers and carry on after we're gone."

"Indeed, you're right, Mr. Shotwell!" exclaimed Bernice. She didn't observe the wry faces made by Otey, Beau, Clay, and Mace as they listened to the old wolf expound the benefits of education. Zenas had never shown much concern for his own sons getting a schooling.

Sheriff Perry Brantley, a lanky man of medium height, with a walrus mustache, walked into the room. As he shook hands with Zenas Shotwell, Ira turned to pull forward chairs for the visitors.

Bernice, on the point of accepting one, hesitated, her eyes fixed on the corner where old Zenas had kicked the empty strongbox. The name of the express company showed plainly on its side. Ira, if no one else, saw the trend of her glance. A chill swept over him. How had they been so careless as to leave that box in the living room!

The next moment, Bernice had walked over and plumped herself down, spreading her voluminous skirt, which effectually hid that telltale stencil marking. "I like a low seat," she said, smiling into Ira's staring eyes.

Young Shotwell covered his confusion with a nod and a short laugh. She must have noticed it was an express box and grasped the significance of its presence in the Shotwell home. Her reason for concealing it from her father's sharp eyes was not quite clear to Ira. Perhaps she had acted to save the sheriff from the guns of the Shotwells if he did his duty in attempting to arrest them. Whatever her motive, Ira was greatly agitated at the thought she had discovered evidence of the Shotwell's true calling.

When his brothers declared they were riding to town with the old man, Ira asked them to saddle a horse for him. He feared there was going to be a showdown before the day was over. Possibly none of them would return to the Leaning S alive. His uneasiness did not leave him after he was in the saddle, riding beside the sheriff's buggy, into which his father had squeezed with the Brantleys.

Bernice had quit her low seat only after the sheriff had left the house, neither by word or sign indicating to Ira that she had guessed the family secret. She would wait to inform her father, no doubt, until he could secure help. Ira hadn't had a chance to warn his father and brothers.

The sight of railroad tracks crossing the south end of Barranca apparently cheered everyone but Ira. The sheriff talked of how the town was going to boom. But to Zenas Shotwell and all but the youngest of his sons, the completion of the road meant a different kind of prosperity. All work had ceased, the supply trains were gone, but the shacks of the track-laying gangs still dotted the right of way. Barranca was crowded with workmen who had been paid off.

As the sheriff's buggy and the mounted Shotwells swung into the main street, a stagecoach lurched in from the west. Ira saw his brother Strom up beside the driver, sawed-off shotgun laid across his knees.

"Hi, you Shotwells!" yelled Strom, as the coach pulled abreast of the sheriff's party. He leaned from the high seat, speaking to Brantley:

"Sheriff, we had another robbery last night. Some gang stood us up and grabbed the strongbox on the outgoin' trip. But I got one of them that I know of."

CHAPTER II

IRA stood in the crowd that filled the sheriff's office, turning his flat-crowned hat round and round in nervous fingers, his gaze pinned to Bernice, who sat in the swivel chair at her father's desk. Brantley was getting up a posse to go after the holdup men. All the Shotwells had volunteered.

Bernice hadn't said a word so far. She didn't know there had been two gangs in last night's robbery, but she could not doubt that the men who had got the strongbox were the ones most eager to join the chase. There were enough Barranca citizens present to back

up the sheriff if she pointed an accusing finger. Ira relaxed a little as she continued to sit quietly listening to the excited talk which preceded the rush for saddle horses. Wasn't she going to tell on the Shotwells?

Ira, the last to go out when the possemen had been selected, caught a farewell smile and wave of the hand from Bernice. She was as serene as if suspicion of the Shotwells' outlaw activities had never crossed her mind. Grateful but mystified, Ira hit the sidewalk and swung into his saddle.

Strom, big and hard-eyed, just the man for shotgun guard if he had played fair with his employers, had agreed to lead the posse to the spot where the robbery had taken place. He hadn't many more trips to make before the stages quit running. Sheriff Brantley was determined to clean up the owlhooters before they shifted attention to express trains.

Glancing at his father and brothers as they loped along, Ira saw they weren't in the least worried about their trail being run out. One reason that they had evaded manhunters so often was their adeptness at trail-blinding.

Three miles west of Barranca, Strom pointed to a clutter of hoofprints beside a rock field. He had spoken of killing one bandit. His father had shot another, the outlaw who wounded Hemet. Both defunct members of the gang that had invaded the Shotwells' territory had presumably been carried off by their mates. The maze of horse tracks did not disclose to the sheriff that two parties of holdups had met here and battled for possession of the stage loot.

The trail which the posse finally straddled, leading southward, was not that made by old Zenas and his boys. They followed it avidly, Ira himself working up considerable enthusiasm. If these interlopers were caught, it should look better for the Shotwells, although that express box in their living room would be hard to explain if Bernice broke her silence.

"Begins to look as if the trail's leading right back to the railroad camp," Sheriff Brantley said to old Zenas, as the horse tracks veered north, in plain view of the rails. "The road's been nearly a year in the makin'. I suppose those stage robbers could've hired out as workmen durin' the day, doin' their ridin' at night."

"I wouldn't be surprised, Perry," agreed Zenas. "The danged skunks!"

Ira, riding in earshot, couldn't suppress a grin. His old man had gall. He looked like anything but a bandit, with his white beard blowing in the wind. Well, he was a seventh son, and this appeared to be another lucky break for him. But would his luck always hold out? Ira didn't believe it, and the thought tightened his lips.

Suddenly he pulled his horse out of line and peered down into a gully. Two huddled forms lay among weeds growing at the bottom. While the posse reined in, Ira dismounted and jumped down the gullyside to turn over the dead bodies. Strom and the sheriff quickly joined him.

"Two of the robbers, I reckon," said Brantley. "Wearin' boots, not brogans like the workmen, but they could've changed before ridin'. Both killed with .45 bullets, not buckshot."

"Had to fall back on my six-gun," Strom answered the lawman's questioning look. "Got two, instead of one, like I figured. Gang carried 'em this far, then dumped 'em off where they weren't likely to be found."

THE posse proceeded, two of them with dead men across saddles. Ira saw Mace eyeing the bloodstained figures with that sick look on his face. Ahead of the party appeared the little shacks where the workmen had lived while building the road. Now deserted, these rude abodes would be torn down, the lumber used for firewood. The horse tracks ended at a pole corral, empty of stock. The prints of high-heeled boots showed that ten or a dozen men had walked away from the corral.

Ira, first to hit the ground, led his mount along this new trail. The tracks of the riding boots mingled with those of broganed feet, but Ira traced them

merringly to the door of a shack. He unslung his Colt before looking in, but the place was abandoned.

The boss of a track crew, curiously watching the posse at the shack, sauntered up to ask what they were searching for. Sheriff Brantley told him to take a look at the dead men. The railroader exclaimed:

"Sure, I know them! Coupla Buck Harvey's cronies. A bunch of ex-cowhands they told me when I hired them. Only fair to middlin' road hands. Brought their own horses, liked to ride when we quit for the day. Paid 'em off yesterday. Who killed them two?"

Brantley jerked a thumb at Strom Shotwell. "He's the stage guard. They held up the coach last night. Been plenty of other stage robberies. Think they're still in Barranca?"

"Might be," said the track boss. "I never liked them fellers. But how could I know I was takin' on a gang of bandits? If you don't get 'em now, sheriff, they'll stick around and rob trains. I'll go with you and point 'em out, if the gang ain't left town. They must've finished out the night in that shack after the holdup."

The railroader mounted behind Brantley, and the cavalcade headed down the right of way toward Barranca. As they struck the main street, the sheriff ordered the possemen carrying the slain outlaws to ride a little in advance.

"They may start a breakaway, seein' that we've found their pals," said Brantley. "We'll cover you if there's shootin'."

Discharged road hands and townsfolk paused on the sidewalks to stare at the procession, which had slowed to a walk. Ira Shotwell, riding near the sheriff's double-burdened horse, saw two slouch-hatted men on a saloon stoop, craning their necks. One turned swiftly, opened a half-door to look into the barroom.

Ira called the attention of the track boss to the pair, and the railroader said, "That's Harvey, facin' this way!"

Brantley stopped his horse and the track boss slid to the ground. Old Zenas and five of his sons, bringing up the rear, caught the sheriff's signal to halt. The rest of Buck Harvey's men were filing from the saloon to join the leader. Harvey, a hatchet-faced man with long, bowed legs, had his eye on the track boss. He knew trouble was brewing, spoke to his gang. They began pushing aside bystanders to reach the hitch-rack.

"I want you, Harvey!" shouted Sheriff Brantley. "Don't touch a gun!"

Ira was out of the saddle, a few paces ahead of Brantley as Buck Harvey answered, "What you want, sheriff?"

"We backtrailed you from the scene of last night's stage robbery," snapped Brantley. "Picked up your two pals that were killed."

"Wasn't there!" retorted Harvey, still moving toward the horses, his men keeping abreast.

The sidewalk was rapidly clearing of onlookers, who sensed that lead was about to fly. All the Shotwells had quit saddles, to fan out and cut off the ex-track crew's escape.

"No use to bluff, Harvey," went on the sheriff. "We've got the deadwood on you. Better give up."

Harvey and his men had reached the rack, jerked loose the slip-knotted reins. So far, they hadn't touched a smoke-iron. The leader suddenly ducked under the tie-rail, wrenched his horse broadside to the advancing possemen and hollered:

"Well, we didn't get the express box! Some other gang did. One was a feller with a white beard, like that old walloper back of you. I seen it in the dark."

Ira held his breath, awaiting the sheriff's reply. Brantley apparently regarded the speech as an attempt to split his attention.

"If you mean Zenas Shotwell, Harvey, he happens to be one of our most solid citizens."

"You lyin' hound!" Zenas yelled at the bandit, his gun spurting.

HARVEY fired back across his saddle, then rose in the left stirrup, threw his right leg over. He triggered again as his horse flashed away from the

rack. His men tried to follow his example, shooting and scrambling for leather.

Ira, trapped in a leadstorm, crouched and thumbed his hammer. The bullet caught an owlhooter in the chest as he straightened after diving under the hitchrack. He was slammed against the rail, pistol smoking, then his knees bent and he rolled in the dust.

Brantley and the other Shotwells had gone into action. A horse reared, struck in the head. The rider sprang free as it crashed on its hide, his gun drumming at Ira, the nearest of the attackers. Young Shotwell felt the bite of lead. Hunched over bucking Colt, he saw the outlaw reel, his spurred feet tangling with the feebly kicking legs of his horse. He buckled, shooting into the ground as he fell.

All but one of Harvey's gang had forked saddles to flee at top speed or drop under withering gunfire. While the rest shelled the riders strung out down the street, Ira peered through the haze at an outlaw stooping at the edge of the sidewalk. Clutching the reins of his frantic horse, the fellow evidently was watching his chance to ride the other way.

As he heaved up, sticking out a foot for the stirrup, Ira's Colt barked. The bandit spun away from his horse, blood gushing from his open mouth. He pitched two wild shots at the dust-filmed Ira before sagging to the dirt.

Young Shotwell jacked out empty shells and reloaded. All along the firing line the guns had lulled. Buck Harvey and four of his gang were pelting for the hills. Sheriff Brantley cried, "Horses!" and plunged back to his mount. Ira was in the saddle as soon as Brantley, counting heads as his father and brothers swung up. Not a Shotwell was missing or seemed to have suffered injury in the gun battle.

It was the beginning of a long but futile chase, for Buck Harvey's gang had been laying rails in the region long enough to know all the best hiding places.

Old Zenas wasn't at all displeased that some of the gang had got away. He believed they'd keep right on going, but if there was any doubt of it in the sheriff's mind, Brantley would be almost certain to blame the Harvey outfit when the Shotwells tried their hand at train robbery. Brantley made for the first saloon as they re-entered Barranca, and every posseman rolled from saddle to follow him.

As Ira was tying his tuckered horse, he caught sight of a lone figure in front of the sheriff's office. Bernice beckoned. Ira, with a glance at the men hitting the batwings, started along the sidewalk. Now was as good a time as any to learn where he stood, while Brantley was drowning his disappointment at not rounding up the whole Harvey gang.

Ira's dusty face gave no hint of his inward trepidation as he approached the girl. She wasn't smiling.

"Did you run them down, Ira?"

"No," he said. "Old hands at the game, I suspect, who hired out as track-layers while waitin' a chance for a holdup. See the fight they gave us?"

"It was terrible." Bernice lapsed into silence, looking at him steadily.

Ira wondered if she had been near enough to hear Buck Harvey say his gang hadn't gotten the express box and accuse old Zenas. The way she looked, she was working up the courage to tell him the Harvey outfit weren't the only outlaws in that neck of the woods. He braced himself for the blow. Then Bernice stepped closer, putting slim hands on his shoulders.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Ira," she said, "but ever since I was at your place this morning, I've been thinking some of the Shotwells robbed the stage." She paused to let him speak, but he was mute, wildly hoping and a little puzzled.

"That express box in the living room—when I saw it, I nearly dropped. It meant but one thing at the moment, and I sat down quickly, covering it with skirt, so Dad wouldn't see it. Afterward, until the posse cornered the robbers here in town, I didn't know what I should do. Then it flashed over me that Strom works for the express people and prob-

ably brought home a discarded strongbox to pack things in. That was it, wasn't it? You don't know how relieved I was when I thought of that, Ira."

Ira's jaw sagged a little, but he forced a smile. "I'm right glad you did, Bernice. There's nothin' to forgive. Just remember that your good opinion matters more to me than anything else in this world."

CHAPTER III

ON THE ride homeward, Ira told his father and brothers how narrowly they had escaped trouble with Sheriff Brantley that morning. "If he had seen that box, the fat would've been in the fire," said Ira. "Good thing for us Bernice had a mistaken idea how it got there, although she was sort of undecided whether to tell or not."

"Good thing for her, too," growled Otey. He was riding stirrup to stirrup with the youngest brother, who turned on him savagely.

"If you'd laid a hand on her, I'd 'a' killed you, Otey!"

"What's the sense talkin' that way when it turned out all right?" Zenas broke in. He added, chuckling, "Even Perry wouldn't believe Harvey when he throwed it in my face about my beard. I was born lucky."

Ira said, "I was hopin', now we're in the clear, you'd decide to stop longridin', Pop."

"That's downright foolish, Ira. Strom, I ain't talked to you yet about changin' over to the railroad, as express messenger. It'll save a lot of fuss if you're handy to open doors when your brothers and me stick up trains."

Strom didn't answer at once, and Ira wondered why. "All right," Strom said finally. "I'll put in my application for the job as soon as I get back to Barranca."

He got the job a month later. Old Zenas planned his first train robbery, for trains were running regularly on the new line. Hemet's shoulder had healed, and he shared the enthusiasm of Otey, Beau, and Clay for the more dangerous business of holding up a train, though that danger should be reduced to a minimum with Strom aiding the gang.

Mace, although he was to be one of the party, did not enthuse. He feared death, just as he shrank from the sight of blood. It was more of an ordeal for Mace to ride in a raid than any of the others. Ira sympathized with this morbidly fearful brother, a year older than himself.

The first holdup was successful, but yielded less in loot than expected, so Zenas was eager to try again. But he let two weeks roll by, during which time Sheriff Brantley and railroad detectives scoured the country. Just as Zenas had figured, Brantley believed the Harvey gang was still around, never gave the Shotwells a thought.

The latter were preparing to ride forth on the second train robbery when trouble developed. It was still daylight as they gathered up saddles to head for a point westward that had been selected for stopping the night express. Strom had assured them that the haul would be bigger this time. Mace was seated in an old rocker, his head in his hands, when the old man, Otey, Hemet, Beau, and Clay started for the door.

"Pick up your saddle and shake a leg, Mace!" snapped Otey.

Mace raised a sweat-beaded face. "I got a feelin' it'll be my last ride, Otey. I hate to go."

"Take a pull at the bottle," advised Zenas. "That'll fix you up."

But Mace still sat, making no move toward the whisky bottle. Ira was leaning in the connecting door. He felt mighty sorry for Mace. It was nothing unusual for Mace to feel he was going to impede a bullet. But it would happen sometime, and this might be the time. Ira's steely eyes fastened on the men waiting at the door. He wondered sometimes how the same blood could run in his veins.

"Ain't there enough of you without Mace?" said Ira. "He hates it and I don't blame him. Go on and leave him here."

"Look who's talking!" jeered Hemet. "We'll let Mace stay, Ira, if you'll take his place. You have more guts anyway."

"Not for that kind of shenanigans!" retorted Ira.

Otey strode back, clamping a hand on Mace's arm to yank him out of the chair. "He'll come if I have to drive him with a gun. Get up, Mace!"

STEEL rasped on leather. Otey shot a look in Ira's direction. He changed color, for Ira was holding a bead on him. Ira's eyes were hot, glowing, violent anger made his voice tremble:

"Let him alone, Otey, and get goin'!"

"Lead me up if I don't, eh?" Otey was surprised at the sudden pounding of his heart. He hadn't known that anyone could excite fear in him, least of all Ira. "The kid ain't bluffin', boys. We'd best put a stop to this before he runs the outfit."

Hemet, Beau, and Clay dropped their saddles, slouched forward menacingly. Hemet roared, "Put up that pistol, you crazy loon! You shoot Otey and you'll have to take on the rest of us."

"It's your choice!" crackled Ira. "If you want to keep on longridin' till the law gets you, that's one thing. Forcin' Mace to tag along is somethin' else. Clear out of the way, Mace!"

Six-shooters filled the hands of Hemet, Beau, and Clay. Otey, seeing his chance, flipped out a Colt. Mace was tense in his rocker, his mouth half-open, staring at his brothers. Old Zenas, stunned for a moment by the violent outburst, abruptly flung his riding gear on the floor and strode between the guns about to spout death.

"Leather them cutters!" he bellowed. "I won't let you murder each other. By ranny, Ira, you started this! Keep shy of the owlhoot if you want to, but don't interfere with the others. Puttin' up that smoker?"

While their eyes clashed, Mace rose heavily from the rocker. "Do like he says, Ira. They'd only fall on you like a pack of lobos. You keep your hands clean."

Ira holstered his .45 and the old man stepped back, glancing around to see that the rest had obeyed. "You fellers get to fightin'," fumed Zenas, "and I wouldn't have nobody left to ride with me. Let this be the last time there's any gun-wranglin' in the family."

He squinted at Mace. "Take a drink and pull yourself together."

He had always dominated Mace, in spite of the latter's fears. Mace clumped to the table. The whisky bottle was half full. He drained it, threw a long look at Ira that the youngest Shotwell never forgot, and lifted his saddle from the floor beside the rocker.

The oldster started briskly for the door, saying, "Grab your gear and step fast! We've a long ride ahead of us."

Ira eased down in the old rocker, commenced to roll a smoke, then crumpled the paper in his fingers. He listened to the hoofbeats leave the yard and die in the distance. He sat there until darkness crept over the ranch house, thinking about cutting his string before the law closed in on the Shotwells. Whether he would be taken with the others, he didn't know. Best to leave, at any rate, before Bernice Brantley found out.

But the chance that she wouldn't decided him against going. He got up and went to the kitchen, lighted the lamp there and prepared a hasty supper. Then he shaved, brushed his clothes and shined his boots, afterward strapping on spurs. With his hat at a jaunty angle, he rode over to the Brantley ranch. The sheriff was in town, but Bernice and her mother made him warmly welcome. The old lady retired after a time. She highly approved of Zenas Shotwell's youngest son.

Ira kept his thoughts away from what his father and brothers were doing out yonder on the steel trail. It wasn't so difficult in Bernice's company. She was full of talk about the new schoolhouse under construction, which would be finished in time to open for the fall term, a week away. They looked at the family album, then Bernice sat down at the piano and Ira turned the sheet music. Their voices harmonized well in the sentimental songs.

It was late before they knew it. Ira disliked going back to that den of thieves, but he was worried about Mace.

THE Brantley ranch faced a wagon road. Bernice walked with Ira to the gate in the east fence, the latter leading his mount. While they lingered at the gate, horsemen pounded up the road and turned onto the Leaning S land. They were indistinct figures flitting through the dark, but Ira made out one empty saddle. No, there was a slumped form in it. He swallowed hard, hoping Bernice hadn't seen the same thing.

"Your father and brothers been to town?" she asked.

"Guess so, Bernice. Well, good night." He stepped up and rode through, the girl closing the gate after him.

The front of the ranch house was lighted up when Ira arrived, the horses of the nightriders had been led away. As he burst into the living room, old Zenas was stamping up and down, hands clasped behind his back. Otey, Hemet, Beau, and Clay stood around a blanket-covered form on the floor. They all looked silently at Ira. He said in a husky voice:

"It *was* Mace's last ride, then?"

The old man nodded, his eyes began to blaze. "I don't understand it! The express-car door opened quick enough when we hollered, but instead of Strom greetin' us, a bunch of strangers cut loose with guns. Mace went down, the rest of us got nicked here and there. Seein' the guards had the bulge, we quit in a hurry, shootin', and draggin' Mace. The boy was dead before we got him on his horse and hit the road flyin'."

"You didn't see anything of Strom?" Ira asked. He was thinking of Strom's hesitation before he agreed to apply for the railroad job.

"Nope. Don't believe he was there. He certainly wouldn't sling lead at his own kin." Old Zenas paused. "Strom ain't like you."

Ira, ignoring this, went and knelt beside the silent form, drawing aside a corner of the blanket. Tears started in his eyes as he gazed at Mace's bloody face.

"He's at peace at last," Ira said in a whisper. "Poor Mace! The one who was most afraid, the first to go." Still kneeling, he turned his head to look at his brothers, at the old man. "This ought to be enough, or ain't it? Will you keep on nightridin' till the clan is wiped out—"

"Take it easy, Ira," interposed old Zenas. He was hard hit at losing a son and getting no loot. "I'm too upset now to think straight. I wish we'd had a chance to clean up them express guards!"

"Grab his feet, one of you," Ira said to his strangely quiet brothers, "and we'll lay him on his bed. I'll wash off that blood that used to turn him so sickish."

Beau stepped forward to help. Old Zenas resumed his restless pacing.

Strom Shotwell rode over from Barranca on a livery-stable horse the next day, just as Ira and Beau finished digging a grave back of the house. Old Zenas jumped Strom before he was off his horse.

"Where in tarnation were you last night, son? How come them gun-chuckers were in that car to mow us down?"

Ira and Beau came around the side of the house, carrying shovels, in time to hear Strom's answer.

"They put me on another run at the last minute," replied the express messenger, "and I couldn't get word to you. Anyone hurt?"

"Mace killed," clipped Ira, watching him sharply.

Strom groaned. "I could hardly wait to get here to find out. I didn't know they'd laid a trap for you, but it looked funny when they changed my run so sudden. The railroad was plenty riled at that first holdup. Maybe they were suspicious of me, I dunno. But Mace—let me see him."

Ira wished that he knew some prayer to say over Mace's grave as they laid him to rest, but, as he didn't, he uttered a few words of farewell that were straight from the heart. Old Zenas's face never lost its hardness. Nor did the faces of five of his sons.

"I'll give it out that Mace left us to settle in a better place," said the oldster. "Not so much of a lie at that."

Ira lingered at the grave after the others had gone back to the house. Half an hour later his somber thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of Strom, heading down to the barn. There was a

furtiveness about his movements that made Ira's eyes narrow.

He stole forward, keeping the corral between him and Strom until the latter vanished in the barn. From the corral, Ira softly covered the remaining distance to the barn door. Strom stood just inside and Ira heard the crackle of paper.

"What you readin', Strom?" he asked, stepping swiftly through the open door.

CHAPTER IV

STROM, looking up with startled eyes, made a quick stab for his gun, and tried to hold the paper out of reach. Ira, agile as a panther, struck his brother's clawing fingers away from the holster, grabbed the paper with his other hand. He saw that it was a reward poster. The railroad was offering a round sum for the bandits who had perpetrated that first holdup. Ira thrust it in his pocket, his hot glance touching Strom, who returned it with interest.

"So you did double-cross Pop and the boys, Strom! For dirty dollars!"

Strom snarled, "I won't get it this time because they slipped out of the trap. Look, Ira, you always kept out of the outlaw doin's, had no likin' for it, so you oughtn't to find fault. I've been thinkin' a long time that the old man will never stop till we're all bumped off. When the first train robbery went over so easy, I was questioned pretty close. I decided I'd just as well throw in with the railroad, save my neck and get what I could out of it. So I told 'em, namin' no names, that there was likely to be another holdup in the near future.

"I was in the express car last night, though the old man and the boys didn't see me. Had to be, to prove I was in earnest about gettin' the bandits. If I helped kill old Zenas and the others—well, who deserves killin' more?"

Ira's eyes were blazing. "But you, doin' it for money and just as guilty as the rest! It's Mace's death that sticks most in my craw, Strom. He was scared all the time, would've quit if Pop and Otey had let him. You, with your double-crossin', killed Mace the same as if you'd fired the bullet that downed him. Pop and the others would shoot you like a dog if they knew you aimed to betray 'em."

"I suppose you'll tell 'em?" Strom said, a tigerish gleam in his eyes, gun arm bent for another drive at his leg-tied holster.

Ira leaped at him, lashing out with his right fist, following up with his left. Strom rocked under the hammerlike blows and sprawled on the straw-littered barn floor. He was out cold. Ira was rubbing his bruised knuckles when old Zenas rushed into the barn.

"Knowed I heard snarlin' and snappin' in here, like two dogs!" the oldster exclaimed, his angry glance shifting from the fallen Strom to his youngest son. "What in time you fightin' about, Ira? Seems like you're packin' a grudge against your brothers."

"Ask Strom when he comes round," said Ira and walked out. He was going to put a match to that reward notice, for Strom would tell anything but the truth regarding their quarrel. Ira didn't want to be the cause of the traitor's death. He would never have pulled a smoke-iron on his brothers last night if it hadn't been to protect the weakling Mace.

Old Zenas was hunkered beside Strom, chewing a straw, when the express messenger drifted back to consciousness. His father greeted him with, "A big steer like you lettin' a yearlin' like Ira whup you! He's carryin' a chip on his shoulder of late. What started it?"

Strom, still a little dazed, tried to think. Evidently Ira hadn't told Zenas. "Why," said Strom, "it was over a girl. Nothin' that matters much. Ira's as tall as me, if he ain't so heavy, and he packs a wallop."

"You mean the sheriff's daughter?" said Zenas, his brow wrinkling. "I didn't know you were cuttin' in there, and Bernice is the only girl Ira goes to see. Say, she might be the reason for him toyin' with the idea of gettin' rid of his disgraceful relatives, the plundering

Shotwells." The old wolf grinned, but there was malice in his eye.

"I don't see how Ira could've had a hand in layin' that trap for us, though maybe that was why he wanted Mace to stay home. They always got along. At any rate, I've been talkin' it over with the other boys, and we don't altogether trust Ira. He's forever yellin' for us to lay off holdups. We ain't aimin' to, none whatever, but I'm goin' to let Ira think Mace's passin' has chucked a scare into us. You help it along, Strom, and I'll let you know when I've figured out a little scheme for our next holdup to play it absolutely safe."

The oldster got up. Strom rose from the floor, nursing his jaw. "Sure, Pop. I'll help fool Ira. No sense your quittin' a game because you lose once or twice."

AT SUPPER, old Zenas announced that Mace's death had put a damper on his spirits that he wasn't likely to get over in a hurry. "Lookin' at that boy in his grave, I realized I'd been too harsh with him. He wasn't cut out for a bandit. Made me think I'd better mend my ways or somebody'd be pattin' me in the face with a shovel one of these days."

Ira, bent over his plate, lifted his head quickly. He looked at the old man, then at his brothers in turn, all of them appearing very solemn. "If you mean that, Pop," said Ira, "it's good news. Pity you couldn't see it that way before Mace was cut down."

The old outlaw pushed his chair back, took out his pipe and tobacco sack. "You'll see whether I mean it or not, Ira."

When Strom left the next morning to go back to work, Ira walked beside his brother's horse long enough to say, "It looks like the old man will quit. That'll cut you off from any future chance of sellin' out him and the boys. It was a rotten trick, Strom. Feel like a murderer?"

Strom put a hand to his bruised face, grinned twistedly. "No, like a mule had kicked me. So long, Ira."

Old Zenas showed a renewed interest in the cattle business. About a week later he made a trip up the line to Jaybird, a small town twenty-five miles west of Barranca. He returned with an order for two hundred head of stock. A cowman named Warrick, operating a ranch outside of Jaybird, wanted them to fill out a beef contract.

Zenas had stopped to see the railroad agent at Barranca about transportation. The agent said he could let Shotwell have the ten or a dozen cars he needed, although it was the busy season, with roundup under way and every outfit putting in its order for rolling stock.

"Two hundred head won't leave us many critters," the old men said to his sons when he got home. "But Warrick will pay higher than the fall market price for the accommodation. Start gatherin' in the mornin'."

It pleased Ira that old Zenas had at last turned his attention to something honest. He rode the range with his brothers, unaware of their covert winks when he expressed his relief that the outfit had forsaken the owlhoot trail before it was too late. Apparently poor Mace hadn't died in vain.

All the Shotwells except Strom were [illegible]ccompany the cattle shipment, taking along horses in a boxcar to drive the herd to Warrick's range above Jaybird. Strom, informed by his father of the scheme behind the stock deal, made plans of his own that old Zenas never suspected.

RIDING into Barranca with the herd one afternoon, Ira found there would be a brief wait until the stock cars were spotted before the shipping pens. When the gates swung shut on the last steer, he left his father and brothers to ride upstreet to the new schoolhouse, which was painted the proverbial red and situated at the extreme west end of Barranca.

Ira hadn't visited Bernice since school opened. Dropping his bridle reins, he clanked to a side window and peered in. Immediately pupils nearest the window were diverted from their lessons. Bernice, observing the cause of their distraction, came quickly to the door.

"Don't want to disturb the class," smiled Ira. "Had so little schoolin' myself, I thought I'd look in and see how the cubs were takin' it after runnin' wild so long. We just drove in with a herd we're deliverin' to Warrick's ranch, up the line."

"That's *all* you're going to do?" Bernice asked, with a strange look on her face.

"You knew about it then?" said Ira in surprise. "Who told you? And what do you mean by *all?* This is the first time we've shipped since settlin' in Segundo Valley."

Bernice nodded, looking charming in a print dress, but still with that expression on her face that made him slightly uneasy. "Dad heard of the deal. I meant you're taking the cattle to Warrick's and taking the next train back, or riding back, perhaps? I've missed seeing you," she added, "but we've both been busy."

Ira heard a noisy switch-engine slamming cars in the yard. "I reckon they're ready to load," he said. "I'll look you up in a day or two."

Jogging back to the shipping pans, Ira couldn't riddle out why Bernice had seemed so concerned about his movements. Certainly there was nothing wrong in selling cattle to Warrick. It was no secret, either, so probably it wasn't strange that Sheriff Brantley should know about it.

He forgot the whole thing once he got a prod pole in his hands and started shoving steers up the runway to the cars. Afterward, the Shotwells loaded their saddle horses and climbed into the caboose. The stock train started with a jerk or two and settled down to riding the rails westward.

Sundown was an hour away when the Shotwells unloaded at Jaybird. The town was made up of a score of dwellings, a dancehall-saloon, a general merchandise store, a blacksmith shop and a livery barn. Busy with the herd, none of the outfit were aware of the interest their coming aroused in certain patrons of the dancehall-saloon. These men, five in number, were ready to duck out the back way if the Shotwells headed for the bar. Otey suggested a drink for all hands, but the old man said they hadn't time.

They drove the herd past the east side of the town while the stock train rumbled away. The watchers in the saloon emerged on the platform when the drag had plodded by, one a tall, hatchet-faced man, who spat tobacco juice as he talked. Finally, they mounted horses at the rack and slowly trailed after the Leaning S drive.

OLD ZENAS, on point, turned abruptly from the trail into a side canyon, three miles from Jaybird. Ira, on swing, stood in his stirrups to look ahead. What was the idea driving the cattle in there, he wondered, with a return of the uneasiness caused by Bernice's strange questioning. He kicked his horse into a run, shouting to Zenas.

"We're holdin' 'em here a while," Zenas boomed back. "Be too late for Warrick to see what they're like and make a head count if we keep goin' tonight."

Ira saw no reason why they couldn't drive to the delivery point and wait at Warrick's for daylight, but he threw himself and bronc into the work of turning the herd canyonward. Its lower end was walled. When they had piled brush and logs to a height of several feet at the front, the cattle were securely boxed.

Night had fallen as they eased out of saddles. Otey suddenly stepped back of Ira, seized his arms and pinned them behind him. Ira, taken by surprise, struggled furiously. Old Zenas darted forward and lifted his six-shooter.

"What's the idea?" Ira panted at his father. Hemet, Beau, and Clay were right behind the old man, their expressions difficult to make out in the gloom.

"The idea is we don't trust you, Ira!" barked Zenas. "Ain't sure but you told the railroaders we were goin' to hold up that second train. I think Mace was the only one of us you ever liked much, and you tried to keep him out of the trap. Maybe the sheriff's daughter influenced you. Anyway, I wasn't takin' any chances this time.

"It's true enough that I sold these cattle to Warrick. But we're also robbin' the

night express at Boulder Draw in an hour or so, then ridin' back and throwin' the herd on the trail to Warrick's. Nobody'll suspect us trail drivers of holdin' up the train, for, on the face of it, we couldn't be in two places at once.

"You couldn't tell the sheriff or anyone in advance, Ira, 'cause you didn't know nothin' to tell. You won't talk afterward, for it's known you left Barranca with the outfit. You'd never be able to prove you didn't wear a mask in the holdup. Matter of fact, I could use you since Mace is gone, but I won't trust you with a gun."

Ira relaxed in Otey's viselike grip. He felt limp and sick at the old man's revelation. Now he understood what Bernice had meant. Her father knew the shipping of the cattle was a blind for the robbery of the night express. He moistened dry lips with his tongue, asked, "Strom wise about the holdup?"

"Sure," said Zenas. "That boy's no traitor."

It was certain, then, that Strom had passed the word along to the sheriff or to railroad detectives, who, in turn, had informed Brantley. Ira's father and brothers would probably be riding to their deaths that night. But he shut his lips. Even if the old man could be convinced of the real reason for his quarrel with Strom, Ira was too incensed at the moment to tell. He said bitterly:

"Then that reform talk was all a bluff, Pop?"

"All a bluff," replied the oldster. "Tie him up boys. We'll be back this way, Ira, pick you up with the cattle."

They roped him so securely Ira knew it would be impossible to release himself unaided. Lying on the ground, listening to their horses' hoofbeats, he fought the inclination to warn those longriders, bound to him by the blood tie. Suddenly he lifted his voice in a shout:

"Pop, come back! Gimme a chance to talk! You'll be shot down if you stick up that train!"

But either they didn't hear him or just thought he was raving. The drum of hoofs continued to recede, finally faded out. Ira thought, *That's the end of 'em,* and his emotions were mixed.

He raised his head, surprised at the resumption of hoofbeats on the south trail. Was it his father and brothers returning? He doubted it, for the rataplan had begun again close at hand, came on steadily. Ira counted five riders against the night sky, and five had ridden away, but he made no sound as they dropped from saddles. Someone said in a guarded tone:

"He's around here somewhere, watchin' the stock, I reckon."

The voice was vaguely familiar. Ira, helpless to defend himself, hoped they wouldn't stumble on him. But, shortly after, a man gliding toward the canyon mouth nearly sprawled across the yielding form. He rammed his gun against Ira's body, felt the rope on him with groping left hand and gave voice excitedly!"

"Here he is, boys! And hogtied!"

AS THEY gathered at the spot, a match flared. Ira recognized Buck Harvey's hatchet face above him. Glaring at the younger man, Buck asked:

"How come they left you this way, Shotwell, when they were goin' to rob a train? Heard you holler out. We were down the road a piece. Followed the herd from Jaybird."

Denial was useless, Ira realized. "They didn't want me along. I've never taken a hand in a holdup."

Harvey snorted, "All you Shotwells are holdup men! I learned we're bein' blamed for everything your gang does. Time we had the game as well as the name. Where they stoppin' the train? If you won't tell, I'll sift lead into you and trail 'em."

Ira considered a moment before answering. If these outlaws were caught in the guntrap, it would be good riddance. "Boulder Draw," he said.

"Know the place well," Buck's eyes gleamed in the light of a second match. "Know a short cut, too, that might get us to the draw ahead of your gang."

"Drill the kid and c'mon, Buck," urged one of his men. "He downed several of

our boys when we were gettin' out of Barranca."

"No hurry about sievin' him," said Harvey, rising. "We'll leave him at the scene of the holdup, pin it on the Shotwells if we're lucky enough to beat them to it. And we won't forget them cattle up the canyon. I hear the kid's horse over yonder. Get it, pronto!"

CHAPTER V

BUCK HARVEY'S gang hit the road at a gallop, with Ira bound to his horse, an unwilling member of the party. But the Shotwells had also traveled at high speed. The short cut taken by the Harvey outfit didn't give them a moment's advantage over their rivals.

Ira's father and brothers had set a flare beside the railroad track. The night express was already slowing down, when Buck and his wild bunch rode into the rocky defile between two hills. Five figures were running alongside the moving express car. Harvey cast loose Ira's horse, which he had been leading, spoke to his men as he swung from saddle:

"Blast 'em the minute the car door opens!"

The train had stopped. A yell pealed from Ira's lips as the Harvey gang walked softly toward the right of way, "Pop, watch out for the gang behind you!"

Then he ducked, for Buck Harvey wheeled, throwing a slug back at him. It chipped the brim of Ira's hat, but the outlaw hadn't a second chance to make up for his error in not gagging the youngest Shotwell.

Old Zenas and his boys pivoted, their guns lancing flame. In the same instant, the door of the express car rolled back. Six-shooters and rifles, in the hands of kneeling men, pumped bullets impartially among the fighting owlhooters.

Ira crouched in the saddle with dilated eyes. The interior of the car was dark, but gunflame lit up the faces of the guards. Sheriff Brantley was there, and Strom Shotwell, pouring lead into the shadowy holdup men retreating from the cinder apron. Beau and two of Harvey's longriders had dropped in their tracks. Whose slugs had killed them would never be known. But the rival gangs, finding themselves the target of law guns, were now facing the common foe together. A roar from Zenas soared above the shooting, "Strom, you dirty dog!"

He had spied his son wielding a .45 against them. Ira shuddered at Strom's sudden cry of agony as a bullet found him. He straightened up with a jerk, towered an instant in the powder-blazing door, then plunged outward to the cinder apron.

The two gangs split up as they withdrew from the right of way, heading in different directions for their horses. Ira's feet were rather loosely tied. He kicked back with spur-armed heels, got his horse running before Harvey and two of his men came up. Ira was taking no chance of Buck Harvey killing him. He raced after the fleeing Shotwells. A rifleman in the express car took a crack at him, the bullet raking his shoulders as he bent over in the saddle.

One Shotwell lagged behind the others. Ira heard his labored breathing, his animal-like whimpers of pain. Ira was nearly abreast when the staggering figure collapsed, crying, "I can't make it!"

The voice was Clay's. Ira called to him, but Clay didn't answer. Unable to stop his horse. Ira swept by the prone figure. Only old Zenas, Otey, and Hemet were left, making the dirt fly in their desperate efforts to reach the broncs. Hearing Ira pounding along, they whirled, guns coming up. He caught the movement, despite dust and darkness.

"It's Ira!" he shouted. "The Harvey gang brought me from the canyon. I'm bound, can't stop this horse!"

Otey made a leap as the bronc tried to pass him and caught the bridle, wrenching with a savage oath. Old Zenas, on the lope again, yelled back:

"Cut him loose, Otey! We know it was Strom double-crossed us."

Otey whipped out a knife, holding the horse with one hand while he slashed at Ira's bonds. "C'mon, if you're ridin' with us!" snarled Otey. "Got to get away from here."

OTEY ran on, with Ira riding at his side. Old Zenas and Hemet were mounted as Otey smashed through the brush to grab his horse. Yelling to stampede Beau's and Clay's mounts, the four Shotwells reined away from the rocky wall. Three wild riders loomed up, heading east, as they struck out for the mouth of the defile.

"Misery loves company!" whooped Buck Harvey. "We'll go with you a ways and save our lead for pursuers. That posse piled out of the express car and caught two of my horses."

Old Zenas raised no objection. If Sheriff Brantley rounded up those loose horses of the Shotwells' in addition, he'd be after the fleeing outlaws with his best fighting men. Six bandits could put up a stiffer resistance than three, if cornered. Zenas wasn't counting on Ira to fight law riders. As the united gangs whipped out of the defile, Ira kept an eye on Buck Harvey and his men. He had no gun and wasn't trusting them too far.

Before they'd put a mile between them and Boulder Draw, Brantley's posse showed up on the back trail. The manhunters pressed them hard. There was no doubt in Zenas's mind that the sheriff knew the identity of the train robbers, hence it would be useless for him and his sons to go back to the canyon, throw the herd on the trail to Warrick's and try to hoodwink Brantley. The pursuing party gave them no opportunity to work the trick, anyway.

Passing Jaybird on the run, the outlaws were several miles beyond, ready to turn and fight, when it was discovered that the posse had pulled up. The killing pace had exhausted the mounts of both parties.

The fugitives reined to a walk, halting in a boulder field where they could make a stand if the lawmen overtook them while resting the horses. It wasn't likely, but Otey and one of Harvey's men kept watch, letting the others catch some shut-eye. Ira was too wrought up to sleep. He could see but one finish to the chase, death for all of them, though he had never broken the law.

Before dawn, they were on the move. Buck Harvey and his men would have quit the Shotwells, to ride in another direction, but Brantley's posse, eager to hunt them down, was closer than the outlaws knew until gunfire split the gloom. The Shotwell and Harvey gangs replied, throwing in the spurs. They drew rapidly out of gun range. The game of hide-and-seek kept up all morning. Old Zenas, with the cards running against him at last, had but one thought in mind: to reach the Leaning S and pick up the stolen money cached there before making tracks out of the valley.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, the outlaws stopped their jaded broncs in a thicket on the edge of Barranca. For the past half hour, the sheriff's party had been lost sight of in the folds of the plain. Brantley probably guessed why the Shotwells were heading for home.

"If we could get us some fresh horses," said old Zenas, looking intently at the sun-drenched street beyond, "we'd have a better than even chance of outridin' them trailers to the ranch and clear of Segundo. But it's uncertain if the townfolks know about us now. I don't like to risk a fight with Brantley comin' hard after us." His eye fell on his youngest son. "Say, Ira, maybe you—"

"Not me," Ira interrupted, tearing his gaze from the red schoolhouse, where he knew Bernice was holding classes at that moment. "I don't aim to lift a finger for this outfit. You wouldn't listen when I argued what would happen. I'm goin' to surrender if Brantley catches up."

"The kid ain't got no nerve, has he?" sneered Buck Harvey.

"He's yellow, all right!" asserted Otey fiercely.

"No," broke in Zenas, "he just ain't built for owlhootin'. But surrenderin won't do you no good, Ira. Nobody'd believe you could live with a bunch of night riders and not—"

HOOFBEATS caused every one of the seven to turn eyes rearward. Through the leafy branches of the thicket, already taking on autumn's hues,

they saw the sheriff and his men coming over a rise. The manhunters would discover them shortly. Old Zenas glared wildly around.

"This is no place to fight 'em. The horses are about done in. That schoolhouse, boys! It's the nearest buildin'. Once we get inside, we'll have the edge on 'em, no matter how many men surround the place. They wouldn't want to shoot the sheriff's daughter nor none of the kids by mistake."

The old wolf snatched out his Colts, leaned toward Ira, thrusting one weapon into his hand. "You'll fight with us, if you got any sense! We need every hand now. Spur up, men!"

"If you don't fight," rapped Otey, I'll salivate you, kid!"

Ira rode out of the thicket with the rest, Zenas, Otey, and Hemet surging into the lead. The Shotwell horses were faster than those ridden by the Harvey gang. But Ira didn't urge his tired bronc to its best pace. He wasn't going to let the ownhooters fort up in the schoolhouse, imperil the girl he loved, or those innocent youngsters. The sheriff and his men were slinging lead, though as yet it struck far behind the racing hoofs.

Ira lifted the old man's six-shooter, caught Zenas in the sights, shifted lower. As the gun flamed, the oldster's horse

plunged at a tangent and fell. Otey, with a bellow of rage, looked back, saw Ira's smoking Colt. Otey thumbed hammer, but his horse broke stride at that instant and went over sideways, pinning its rider.

Hemet's face, turned to the rear, was a mask of fury, suddenly filmed with gunsmoke. His bullet rocked Ira in the saddle. The youngest Shotwell's .45 streaked fire. Hemet's horse nosedived, piling him. Ira knew his father and brothers would never reach the schoolhouse on foot. Sheriff Brantley and his men were coming too fast. Two of them had rifles.

His heart like lead in his chest, the blaze of Buck Harvey's gun almost caught him unaware. Ira fired back, though there was a spreading numbness in his side where Buck's bullet had hit him. He saw Harvey spin off his horse and flop in the dust. Harvey's companions were drilling away. One slug struck Ira, the other struck his horse. They went down together, but Ira had cleared the stirrups, rolled away from the kicking bronc. His gun swung up, focusing on the two riders pounding toward the schoolhouse. Ahead of them, old Zenas, Otey and Hemet were stretching their legs in a desperate foot race. Ira squeezed trigger. A rider, firing back under his left arm, suddenly spilled to earth. With his last shot, Ira felled the second horseman, then the crackling Winchesters broke on his ears.

Old Zenas leaped high and came down in a slack heap. Ira couldn't look after that, but, as he sat staring at the ground, he heard Otey's bellow of defiance cut short, the piercing scream of Hemet. It was all over. He raised blurred eyes to see the posse thundering in, two with smoke-wisping Winchesters bent on Ira.

He dropped his six-shooter and rose up, lifting empty hands. But something was the matter with him, his legs wobbled and the horsemen approaching seemed to revolve in the brilliant sunlight. Ira had dropped face downward when they reached him.

Bernice Brantley had put her head out of the schoolhouse door as the firing ceased. She saw Ira go down. Holding her wide skirt clear of the dust, she sped toward him, hardly seeing the dead outlaws and horses strewn along the way. Ira's head was in her lap. She was stroking it with tears running down her cheeks when his eyes unlidded.

"I don't believe I'm going to rack my chips, Bernice," said Ira, "but—but would you care?"

"Of course I would!" she sobbed. "I hoped you'd take warning when I asked if delivering those cattle to Warrick's was all you were going to do. I couldn't make it plainer without being unfaithful to Dad, whose plans were all made to capture the train robbers."

"But I didn't know there was to be a robbery," explained Ira. "Pop and the boys hoodwinked me. It only came out after we left the train at Jaybird. You see, I wouldn't side them in any of their holdups. They thought I'd squealed, but it was Strom. I kept tellin' them what the finish would be. Can you believe me, Bernice?"

Spurs chimed nearby. Sheriff Brantley looked down at his daughter and Ira. The latter sat up painfully, eyes fastened to the lawman's face, which had a kindly expression.

"Your father just breathed his last," said Brantley. "He was very anxious I should know you were no outlaw, like the rest of the family. A dying man usually speaks the truth. Anyhow, I saw you shoot their horses to keep them from reaching the schoolhouse. They'd have given us a lot of trouble if they had got inside. Couldn't quite bring yourself to down your old man and brothers, and I admire you for that. But the Harvey gang were different, eh? I believe you're the seventh son of a seventh son, Ira. They're said to be lucky."

Ira nodded. He'd never thought so before, but as he turned his gaze to Bernice, he was sure of it. The warm glow in her eyes was all for him

"I'll answer your question, Ira," she said. "It would have been the same before Dad spoke. I couldn't believe anything but the best of the boy I love!"

Bad luck dogged postman Andy Burke's snow-laden footsteps when he took the cold trail to Hangtown. For Andy's rival had been sparking his girl, and now he was fixing to ruin Andy's mail-delivery business. But neither had counted on the kind of treachery dealt out by a . . .

Blizzard Boomerang

By Joseph Chadwick

ALL that summer and fall, young Andy Burke's dogs had been the joke of the mining camps in and around Oro Gulch. They were a Newfoundland-St. Bernard cross, and big enough to eat a man out of house and home. But when winter came and snow bogged down the pack-mule outfits, Andy put those four shaggy brutes to earning their keep. He harnessed them to a sledge and let them haul letter and treasure express through the high Sierras.

Folks stopped joshing Andy about his "pets," then, and every snowbound camp and lonely diggings welcomed the eager yelping that heralded his Dog Express. Except for one other expressman, Big Bart Hanlon, who traveled by skis, Andy Burke was the only link between Oro Gulch and the outside world. Men far from home and loved ones counted on both Andy and Bart Hanlon getting through, snow or no snow, and they cheerfully paid a quarter ounce of dust—

four dollars—to receive or send out a letter. One of the tools of Andy's trade was a steel sewing thimble. It held exactly one quarter ounce of dust as it came from the miner's pan.

With his dog sled, Andy depended upon quantity. He could haul two hundred pounds of express—letters and newspapers into the ore hills, letters and dust out to Sacramento. Big Bart Hanlon, on his skis, depended upon speed. He carried a hundred pounds in a back-pack.

At the start, neither expressman crowded the other too much. With plenty of business, there was no need for keen competition. When one was heading for Sacramento, the other was trailing back into the hills. But in mid-December, Andy found Hanlon's trail crossing his own. At Darktown, the northernmost stop on Andy's route, a red-bearded miner named Tulane grudgingly filled Andy's thimble with dust from his poke.

"Bart Hanlon's handling letters for two dollars."

"What's that?"

"You heard me, son. Big Bart cut his price in half."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

"You mean to say Hanlon was through here yesterday?"

"That's right," Tulane growled. "And I sent out my letters and a hundred ounces of dust with him. Other miners here in Darktown did the same. No sense in paying you twice what Hanlon's asking—when he gets through in less time than your Dog Express."

Andy was frowning. He said, "Well, that's your privilege. But I'm not cutting prices. I risk my life every trip I make. So does Bart Hanlon. He's a fool to work so cheap."

He went on, delivering letters and newspapers around Darktown. He demanded a quarter ounce of dust for each letter and half an ounce for the newspapers, which were weeks' old copies of New York papers that had come off the latest arriving steamship at Frisco. And all around the camp he heard the same complaint Tulane had made. Big Bart Hanlon was handling express at half his rates.

Andy picked up only three letters and one poke for delivery at the Sacramento Wells, Fargo office. When he left Darktown and headed toward Oro Gulch, he was puzzled and sore. He couldn't figure out what Hanlon was up to. A man on skis, carrying a back-pack, couldn't handle all that back-country business.

Except for Darktown, where Hanlon had beat him out, Andy had picked up the usual amount of express. The leather pouches under his sled tarp contained nearly a hundred pounds of letters and dust, plus more than four thousand dollars in dust that was his gross profit on this single trip. And he would pick up enough express at Bellville to make up a full load—and increase his profits.

The express business was a bonanza in its own right, and Bart Hanlon was a fool to tamper with such a profitable trade. Riding his sled, keeping the dogs running, Andy kept trying to figure out what his competitor was up to. He began to have an ugly suspicion. Hanlon might be trying to ruin him!

IT WAS nearly dark when Andy's noisy outfit raced into Bellville, at the south end of the Gulch. Bellville was a tent and shanty town, like Darktown, but it boasted half a dozen solid frame buildings housing business places. One two-storied building was occupied by Sam Bennett's general store, and Andy went there after stopping at his own shack to feed the dogs.

Sam Bennett was a gray-haired and mild-mannered man of fifty. He acted as Andy's Bellville agent, and Andy hoped that one day Sam would be his father-in-law. The merchant had an eighteen-year-old daughter. He was busy with a customer when Andy entered the stock-cluttered store, but after a minute or two was free. They shook hands.

"I've nearly four hundred letters for you," Sam said. "And twenty pokes of dust. There would have been more, only Bart Hanlon was through here today. He's cut his handling charges, Andy."

"I heard about it up at Darktown. What's he up to, Sam?"

"He's riled up because your dogs can haul more express than he can carry."

"It doesn't make sense. How's he going to handle the business he's taking away from me?"

"He's hired a couple of men, Andy. You know the Dodson brothers?"

"Luke and Pete?" Andy said, frowning. "Sure, I know that no-good pair. They tried to hold me up over at Ute Pass, one night last summer. I was packing out a lot of dust by mule, and they'd have got it if I hadn't put up a fight. I wounded Pete that night, and they've both kept shy of me since. Bart Hanlon's crazy to trust those two."

"Well, he's trusting them," Sam Bennett said. "He sent them out this morning with back-packs. The Dodsons are traveling on snowshoes."

"Did Hanlon leave, too?"

"No, he's still here in town."

"I'll have a talk with him."

"You plan to meet his new rates, Andy?"

Andy shook his head. "I figure he'd just cut under me again," he said. "If he tries to squeeze me out of the express business, he can hold out longer than I can. Hanlon has plenty of money back of him; he owned a couple of good placer claims that he sold for a big price before he started his express route. But I can't understand why all of a sudden he wants to squeeze me out. He used skis before I got my dogs, so he shouldn't be sore about that."

Sam Bennett lighted his pipe, smoked for a little while in thoughtful silence. Then he said, "Andy, maybe I shouldn't take sides in this, but you're more my kind of man than Big Bart Hanlon is. It's my idea that Hanlon's working against you because of my daughter."

"So he's got his eye on Mollie!"

"He's a ladies' man, that Hanlon," Sam said. "He must know that Mollie's fond of you. So he figures that by squeezing you out of the express business, he'll squeeze you out where Mollie is concerned. Were I you, Andy, I'd pop the question to the girl right now." He pointed with the stem of his pipe toward the curtained doorway at the back of the storeroom. "She's in the kitchen, son."

He moved away then, for a customer was entering. Andy Burke started toward the kitchen doorway, then halted. He found himself trembling and afraid. He did not know why he should be frightened by the thought of asking Mollie Bennett to marry him. He was not a coward; when the Dodsons had jumped him that night last summer, he had grabbed out his pistol and driven them off.

Yet he was afraid to face Mollie. Andy guessed he was afraid she would say no. So long as he didn't ask her to marry him, he would have hope. But once she refused him, it would be final and he wouldn't be able to court her. Andy was sure that Mollie would turn him down, for a girl would certainly prefer Big Bart Hanlon to him. Sam Bennett said, "Go on back, Andy."

MOLLIE was busy at the cookstove. She had an Irish stew on top and was placing a pan of biscuits in the oven. There was a smudge of flour on her left cheek when she turned to Andy. She was a tall and well-built girl, which made Andy too much aware of his own lack of stature. Mollie's hair was spun gold, and she wore it plaited, with the plaits encircling her head like a crown. Her blue eyes were always smiling, and her lips were full and red and provocative. The beauty of her awed Andy.

"So you finally came to see me," Mollie said brightly. "I heard your dogs come in long ago."

"I had to feed the pups, Mollie."

"Sometimes I think you care more about those dogs than you do about—about your friends."

"That's not true, Mollie. Not in your case, anyway."

"Well, stay for supper," Mollie said. "If you didn't eat with your dogs." She saw him glance at the table, where four places were set. "Bart Hanlon's going to be here. I made the Irish stew for him."

Andy felt frozen inside. He heard himself stammer that he had eaten supper, which wasn't the truth. But he knew he didn't want to be there with Bart Hanlon shining up to Mollie. Hanlon had a way of making him feel smaller than he really was. Andy stood silent for a long moment, turning his hat over and over in his hands. Mollie gave him an exasperated look as she stirred the stew.

"For heaven's sake, Andy—sit down and relax!"

"There's something I want to say to you, Mollie."

"There is?" Mollie said, turning full around.

"I was thinking lately," Andy said awkwardly, "that you and I get along pretty well together. I have some money saved up, enough to start up housekeeping. If I can keep Bart Hanlon from cutting in on my route, I'll be able to afford a—"

"A what?" Mollie asked. "A housekeeper?"

"No, not that. I was thinking about getting married."

"To me, Andy?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Because we get along pretty well together?"

Andy gulped and nodded, then took a backward step as he saw Mollie's eyes grow angry. "I just thought maybe you—" he stammered.

"Andy Burke, that's the poorest proposal I ever heard of," Mollie said. "No girl would accept it. I guess there's just no romance in you, Andy. Why, you should take lessons from Bart Hanlon. He knows how to flatter a girl, and how to say the things she likes to hear!"

"I'm sorry, Mollie. I thought—"

"Thought?" Mollie exclaimed. "Don't you ever feel?"

Andy had no chance to answer that, for now he heard Bart Hanlon's voice. Mollie too had heard. She turned quickly back to her cooking.

Andy didn't wait for Bart Hanlon to reach the kitchen, but went to meet the burly expressman in the storeroom. Hanlon exclaimed, "Well, well; it's the dog-team man! How's the express business, Andy?"

"Hanlon, I want to talk to you. You got a minute?"

"Sure, partner. Let's step outside."

HANLON led the way from the store, then smilingly faced Andy. He was nearly a head taller than Andy Burke, and wider across the shoulders. He had reddish brown hair, and blue eyes full of mockery. He was tough as well as handsome, however, and he had a reputation as a barroom brawler.

"What's on your mind, partner?" he asked.

"What's the idea in cutting express rates?" Andy demanded. "We've not been charging too much, figuring that the miners can pay plenty for having their mail and dust carried through the mountains. We risk our lives, every trip we make. Plenty of expressmen have been killed—some by Indians, some by bandits, and others by blizzard and floods. What's the sense of working so blamed cheap?"

Hanlon's good humor faded. "You sure must have been born just yesterday, Burke," he said flatly. "I'm out to take over your route."

"Why? Because I'm using a dog-sled?"

"Maybe just because I aim to be the big boy in Oro Gulch," Hanlon said. "That's reason enough. If you want to make a fight of it, go ahead. I'll hold on longer than you can. I'll always carry the express at half your prices, even if you charge only two-bits a letter. I've got two men working for me already—"

"The Dodson brothers," Andy said angrily. "You trust them, and they'll steal the dust out of your pouches. Last summer they tried to hold me up in Ute Pass."

"I know what the Dodsons are," Hanlon said, beginning to grin again. "I'm not trusting them with the miners' pokes. They're carrying mail, and nothing more. I'm takin' the dust myself. Fast express, my friend. No man's faster on skis than I am. That's what I tell the miners—fast and safe express to Sacramento."

Andy was trembling with anger. "Maybe you want to buy me out?" he said.

"Buy you out?" Hanlon mocked. "Why should I waste money like that? Before spring I'll have you pushed to the wall —without paying you a red cent. You're done in Oro Gulch, Burke. The sooner you quit, the better for you!"

Hanlon swung away, went back into the store. He slammed the door after him.

Andy went back to his own shack and built a fire in the stone fireplace. But even after the blaze took the chill out of the shack, he felt cold inside. He was whipped, beaten. Nothing would ever come of fighting back. Bart Hanlon could afford to cut prices all the way to the bottom. But what hurt Andy more was Mollie's admitted preference for the man. Andy guessed that the girl didn't know about Hanlon's drunken brawls and carryings-on with dance-hall girls in Sacramento and Frisco.

What he should do, Andy didn't know. He'd think it out on the trail tomorrow, after he'd loaded up the express waiting in Sam Bennett's store.

It was a sleepless night for Andy Burke. His troubled thoughts kept him awake part of the time, and then too it grew colder and he had to crawl from his blankets several times to throw wood onto the fire. A wind had risen and was swirling through the gulch. It seemed to threaten a blizzard, but when morning came the sky was clear.

Andy fed his dogs, cooked himself a meal, then harnessed up and drove to the Bennett store. Sam turned the letters and miners' pokes over to him. Andy stowed the letters into one leather pouch, then checked each poke of dust to see that it was properly tagged with its owner's names. The twenty pokes, going into a separate pouch, weighed close to a hundred pounds. Andy would be trailing with a full load. Sam Bennett followed him out to his sled.

"You decide to fight Hanlon?" the merchant asked.

"Can't make up my mind," Andy told him. "I haven't got much chance against him. Mollie up yet, Sam?'

"She's fixing breakfast."

"Tell her I said good-by, will you, Sam?"

"Sure. But that sounds as though you won't be back. I better not let Mollie think you're leaving for good." Sam squinted up at the sky. "Clear as a crystal. But there's a blizzard coming, sure. Feel it in my bones. Well, s'long, son."

"So long, Sam."

ANDY cracked his whip and yelled at the dogs. The big animals jumped up and, with Andy pushing the sled, got under way. The outfit headed south out of Oro Gulch, then swung west along the mountain trail. The wind lifted the powdery snow and swept it along in clouds.

As the trail climbed, Andy ran behind the sled and pushed. Such effort kept him from feeling the full bite of the frigid gale. The sky began to cloud up before he was half an hour out of Bellville, and he knew then that a blizzard was coming and that he would be caught in the open. That wasn't a pleasant prospect.

He was riding the sled down a mile-long slope an hour later when a shout came from behind him. Before he could look around, Big Bart Hanlon shot past him on his skis. The burly expressman was laughing. He had a pack and a rifle strapped to his back, and carried a skiing pole in each hand. The momentum of his downward course carried him a third of the way up the next slope, then he used the poles to help him climb. Hanlon was lost to Andy's sight before the dog-rig had reached the ascending slope.

The blizzard held off until midday, when Andy was at the halfway mark of his trip to Hangtown where he would exchange dog-sled for pack-mule. But when the storm closed in, it was a severe one. The snow was a murky white curtain blotting out the trail and most of the landmarks.

Andy had to feel his way, and he was able to keep to the trail only because he had traveled it so many times before and knew it like the palm of his hand. But the big dogs were as eager as ever. Barking vociferously, they plowed through the storm at a trot or a hard run. Andy had

done well in choosing animals that loved the snow and cold. He rested them for half an hour in a sheltered spot formed by angling cliffs, giving each dog a scrap of jerked beef.

The howling gale kept up, and the snowfall was undiminished. By midafternoon, Andy passed Granite Mound and knew Ute Pass was close ahead. It was just as he saw the black bulk of Granite Mound that the dogs began acting up. Andy himself thought he heard a voice shouting.

He halted the team, called, "Hello!" He thought he heard an answer, so shouted again. That time he was sure someone was calling out. It seemed to come from the right of the trail, so Andy swung the team back through some scrub pines. On the far side of the trees he came upon a man half buried by snow. The man was sitting up, his back to a rock. It was Big Bart Hanlon.

"Burke, it's you—"

"What happened, Hanlon?"

"The Dodsons," Hanlon said, his voice twisted by agony. "The ornery sons crossed me up. They waited all night on the trail for me. They shot me without warning. My left leg's broken. Andy, you've got to get me to Hangtown!"

"Why'd the Dodsons shoot you?"

"They wanted the gold I was packing to Sacramento," Hanlon growled, and had a fit of cursing. "They got rid of the letter packs I paid them to carry. I was a crazy fool to trust such no-goods. You'll haul me in to Hangtown, won't you, pard? I'm freezing to death. I've lost a lot of blood, and my leg hurts like a toothache. Help me on your sled, Andy."

"I've got a full load, Hanlon," Andy said. "My dogs can't pull another pound. I've got to push, even on level ground."

"Hell—you can't let me die here, Andy!"

"You've sure changed your tune. I never expected to hear Big Bart Hanlon whine like a beggar. Why should I lift a hand to help you? You've been doing me dirt. Just yesterday—"

He broke off, jolted by the way Hanlon silently looked at him. If there had ever been hopelessness in a man's eyes, it was in Bart Hanlon's.

THE hurt man knew he wasn't going to be helped, but he didn't rant or turn profane. He just stared up at Andy, with his eyes full of despair. He was wearing a fur cap and a woolen muffler, but his exposed face had a bluish tinge. Andy could see that he was close to freezing to death.

How many hours Hanlon had been there like that, Andy didn't know. But one thing was certain; Bart Hanlon had willed himself to live and stay conscious because he had known Andy Burke was coming along the trail. He had had no hope of any other rescue; there wasn't one chance in a million of anyone else coming through in a blizzard.

Andy said, "What would I do with my express? I'd have to leave it behind, to haul you."

Hanlon didn't say anything.

"Dammit, you wouldn't do it for me!"

Still Hanlon said nothing. And Andy somehow knew that though Bart Hanlon had tried to squeeze him out of the express run, he'd not have let him die there had the situation been reversed. Andy was gripped by indecision. He'd have to cache letter and treasure pouches. He would have to run the risk of some chance traveler stumbling upon the cache and making off with the dust. It amounted to many thousands of dollars, most of it belonging to miners and some of it his own.

But Andy was responsible for it all. An expressman had to make good any losses. Andy looked around. He had Granite Mound for a landmark. He loosened the sled's tarpaulin and began burying his pouches in the snow. When the sled was empty except for his bedroll and rifle, he turned to Hanlon.

"All right," he said. "Let me get a hold of you."

"Easy—" Hanlon muttered.

Hanlon weighed more than two hundred pounds, and it was all Andy could do to get him onto the sled. Hanlon helped himself as well as he could, then passed out. Andy opened his bedroll and cov-

ered him with both blankets and tarpaulin. He couldn't find Hanlon's bedroll, rifle, or skis. They had been stolen by the Dodsons or were buried in the snow. Andy shouted, cracked his whip, shoved mightily against the sled. The dogs strained in their harness, the four of them barking wildly in unison. From under the tarpaulin came a groan.

Giant cliffs loomed, but the dogs nosed out the narrow cut and headed into Ute Pass. It twisted tortuously. At places it was so narrow that a man could have extended his arms and touched either wall. And it was as still and silent as a tomb. The wind didn't sweep through the Ute, and even the snowfall was sparse within the quarter-mile long cut. At the far end, it widened somewhat.

A few trees and a great many boulders filled the broad exit, and here the blizzard howled again. A blast of frigid air made Andy's eyes water, blinded him momentarily. Not until he blinked away tears did he see why the team had stopped. A fallen scrub pine blocked the trail.

Andy muttered an oath under his breath. He was down on his luck lately. First, Bart Hanlon tried to squeeze him out of the express run. Second, Mollie Bennett had turned him down. Then he had had to cache his cargo back in the hills to save Bart Hanlon's life. Now he would have to struggle against a tree that the storm had seen fit to fell across his path. Andy wished he had carried an ax.

Hanlon stirred, flung aside the tarpaulin. Thick-voiced, he said, "We at Hangtown yet, Andy?"

"Not by ten miles or more—dammit!"

"What's holding us up?'

"A tree across the trail. Can't you see it?"

Hanlon struggled to sit up, but couldn't make it. "Give me a hand," he said. "I'll take a look."

ANDY helped him but only grudgingly. He could not help thinking how much better it would have been for him if he hadn't found Bart Hanlon back on the trail. Hanlon would have died, sure. That would have made a lot of things right—for Andy Burke.

Hanlon said, "I'd help you if I could, partner."

Andy said sourly, "Just squat there and take it easy."

He plodded over drifts, stumbled once and fell sprawling. The wind tore at him, and the icy snow stung his face like myriad needles. He grabbed hold of the pine's trunk, then quickly let loose and came erect. He was chilled by sudden alarm. The wind may have toppled the pine, but only after its trunk had been cut through by an ax. Even as Andy suspected a trick, two men came from the other pines. He recognized them at once as the Dodson brothers. Burly Luke had a rifle, and Pete, a much smaller but just as tough a customer, had a pistol leveled.

It was Pete who yelled, "We've got you this time, Burke!"

Pete Dodson's pistol roared.

Andy felt the slug tear through his wool-lined coat. He was unhit, but he fell backward. The branches of the felled pine had tripped him. He clawed at his coat, in a panic to get at his own pistol.

All in a split second, his mind leapt from one bleak thought to another. He was a fool to wear his gun under a buttoned coat; he should have guessed that the Dodsons might not be satisfied with having robbed Hanlon, knowing as they did that the Dog Express would be coming through with a big load of dust; and he knew too that Pete Dodson bore him a grudge, and meant to kill him. As so much ran through his mind, Andy lay sprawled on his back.

Then he got his pistol out. He rolled over and came to his feet. Pete Dodson was aiming for a finishing shot. Luke was throwing the rifle to his shoulder. But before either of the outlaws could fire, another gun blasted.

Luke Dodson cried out, stumbled, began to collapse. Pete Dodson swung around, staring toward the sled. Because of the snow, he had trouble seeing Bart Hanlon slumped down on the sled. He fired a wild shot, then whirled back toward Andy. Pete cursed as he tried to

bring his weapon to bear, then, as Andy's bullet crashed into him, he gave a strangling gasp. He was dead before he collapsed to the snow.

Andy cleared the trail, removing the tree and the two dead men. When he got back to the sled, Bart Hanlon was still gripping the rifle—Andy's rifle—which had killed Luke Dodson. He looked deadbeat and in great pain, but he managed a lopsided grin.

"You hit, partner?" he asked.

"No," Andy said. "How about you?"

"Pete's shot missed me by a mile."

"We'll travel, then."

They headed out without mentioning the fact that if Andy had left Bart Hanlon to die back on the trail, he would have been killed by the Dodsons here in Ute Pass. Both men were aware of that.

Andy got the hurt man to Hangtown and turned him over to Doc Sanders who was good at treating gunshot wounds and setting broken bones. Andy spent the night in that rowdy mining town, then at sunup headed his dog team back through the mountains. The blizzard had beaten itself out, and the trail back was easy going.

Andy found his cache, reloaded his express pouches. Trailing back again toward Hangtown, he stopped at the west end of Ute Pass and searched among the pines. He found the Dodson brothers' camp in the timber and located Bart Hanlon's back-pack. He found no signs of the letter packs the Dodsons had been hired to carry, however. He took Hanlon's dust-heavy pack with him, and, reaching Hangtown, returned it to the big expressman.

Bart Hanlon was abed in a room over Rigby's Saloon. In answer to Andy's question, he said he was feeling a lot better. But his left leg was in splints, and it would be many weeks before he could hit the trail again. He thanked Andy for bringing in his pack.

Andy said, "You want me to take it on to Sacramento?"

Hanlon nodded. "I'd appreciate it, Andy," he said. He looked a bit sheepish. "I'm feeling like an ornery son for planning to take over your express run. But it wasn't because I was sore about you using a dog team and carrying more express than I could back-pack. What got in my craw was Mollie's turning me down when I asked her to marry me. She told me a week ago that she was waiting for you to get up nerve enough to ask her—"

"I did ask her," Andy said, "the night before I left Bellville. She turned me down, saying I didn't know how to say the things a girl wanted to hear. I figured she was stuck on you, Bart."

"I sure wish she was," Hanlon replied. "But she's a smart one, Mollie is. She knows you'll make the best husband, Andy. But you mustn't have popped the question in the right way. Did you tell her that you were crazy in love with her? Did you say she was the prettiest filly a man could find along any gold trail?"

Andy shook his head. "I haven't got the words, Bart."

Hanlon grinned. "Tell you what, partner. When you get back from Sacramento, stop in to see me. I'll tell you how to propose to Mollie Bennett!"

Trail of the Invisible Herd

By Kenneth L. Sinclair

With his herd boxed in by a ruthless neighbor and his cattle dying of deep winter's savagery, Ray Landred pitched one trouble against another to make a six-gun showdown.

RAY LANDRED had kicked up his heels a time or two, but he was no gunman. Just an easygoing young cuss with a mouth that always seemed on the verge of breaking into a wide grin. He had a liking for horses, high jinks and genial hoorawing. He carried a gun, sure, but his idea was that the weapon was mainly useful against coyotes and rattlers.

Two years hadn't changed him much. When he rode back into Chinook Crossing on the tail end of the winter's first blizzard he was the same lean, deliberate young cuss as before, easy in the saddle and friendly of manner. Maybe a shade more solemn, because of the nature of his errand.

He'd been in town only five minutes when he tangled with Ed Rawson.

Having put up his horse in the livery barn, where the gelding would be

watered, fed, and kept out of the bitter cold, Landred was crossing the street when the Rafter-B foreman emerged from Clem Raymer's Lucky Dollar saloon.

Rawson reached for the reins of his horse, standing huddled against the storm at the saloon hitchrack. Then he saw Landred.

He called, "Hey, Playful!" Then he came barging into the street, his boots kicking up little flurries of loose snow.

Landred winced. That old nickname still stung. But he waited for Burvell's squat, redfaced foreman. "Come back to take the old man up on his offer?" Rawson demanded.

"No. I came back to find out what the hell's been going on here."

Rawson's face hardened. His mouth twitched down at one corner. "Well, now," he drawled, looking Landred up and down, "was I you, I'd get me a nice warm room at the hotel. One with lace curtains on the winders. Because if you got any ideas about goin' up to Bunchgrass Basin, you'll find that runnin' a spread in the wintertime ain't much to your taste. It's a mighty long jump from fritterin' away your time seein' whose horse is the fastest, an' cuttin' capers for the gals, an' such. Your dad ain't alive now to stomp on anybody that might interfere with your fun. Too bad the old gullywhacker didn't cash his chips a long time ago."

Ray Landred said, very softly, "Had your say, Ed?"

"Well, if you're wantin' some more—"

Landred stepped forward, half smiling, and whipped a long, sudden blow to Rawson's jaw. The blow was a little high, partly because Rawson jerked his head down. There was a crunching sound, a spurt of blood.

Rawson reeled back, gave a little yip of mingled astonishment, pain and fury. Losing his balance, he sat down heavily in the snow.

He lifted a trembling hand to his mashed mouth, spat out a tooth and some blood. "Why, you damn' young good-for-nothin'!" he snarled. "Tackle a officer of the law, will you? I'll teach you that things are different now, in Chinook Crossin'!"

He made an abrupt, convulsive grab for his gun.

But his position, and the fact that he wore a heavy mackinaw against the winter cold, slowed him up. Ray Landred darted in, aimed the toe of his boot at Rawson's gun-hand.

The kick connected. The gun went flying, to land in the snow ten feet away. Rawson made no sound. But he clutched at his wrist with his left hand. The pain of it doubled him up.

Landred danced back. "Want to get up and have it out, Ed?"

Rawson lifted his twitching face. "Damn you, you busted my wrist! Mister, I'll get you for this. I'll nail your hide to—"

"Any time, Ed," Landred agreed.

TURNING away, he took the precaution of picking up Rawson's gun and throwing it as far as he could. Then Landred strode down the street. In the gathering dusk he noticed a light in Giff Granling's office, upstairs over the barbershop. He climbed the rough-board stairway, knocked, and went in.

The old lawyer, whose bushy mane was completely white now, greeted him warmly. They talked for a few minutes, carefully skirting the thing that lay heaviest on their minds. Then Granling said, "You must have gotten my letter."

Landred nodded. "It was a long time catching up with me. When it did, there was another one with it—one from the boys up at the ranch. Next day I got one from Burvell."

"Then you know the whole story. I lost a mighty good friend, Ray. Your father's heart simply quit on him."

They were silent for a bit. Then Landred said, "I wish I could have gotten back before it happened. Dad and I— You know how things stood between us. He kept wanting to spread out, crowd anybody who happened to get in his way. I kept telling him that we had some of the best range in the state up there in the Basin, except during hard winters, and that other folks

had to live too. We couldn't agree, so I had to let him run the ranch his way. Then when I decided it was high time I was doing something on my own, I lit out. It looks like I was dead wrong."

"Not entirely. Burvell has lived in fear of your dad, ever since they tangled twenty years ago and Burvell got gun-whipped and thrown in the river. He had it coming—he was lucky he didn't get strung up for throwing a wide loop on your range. But he's a hater. With your father dead, he jumped at the chance to even the score. He's thrown a fence across the valley. He's got you bottled up—and this winter is turning out to be a mean one."

Landred massaged his aching knuckles. "The boys wrote me that the Basin is snowed in so deep that there's no hope of feeding through. They lost most of their hay when the stacks burned. Is there any place I can buy some hay?"

"Burvell's got lots of it. But he won't sell. He knows that your only other bet is to haul hay up from the Tillicum Flat. And that's a hundred-mile haul. Through this snow, you'd never be able to bring in enough to keep three hundred head alive."

"Three hundred—is that all that are left?"

"Yes. The boys had some losses. Got hold of some poisoned salt, or something. And when your father passed away there were creditors to satisfy—we had to sell off half the herd. Luckily, Burvell hadn't gotten his fence thrown across the valley then. The boys have kept the best breeder stock, so you can rebuild the herd—if you can last out the winter."

"From what Mel Trent told me in his letter, the cows will be dying in another few days! I've got to get them out of the Basin, down into lower ranges where they can feed. Can't we force Burvell to open that fence? It can't be legal to bottle up a ranch like he's done!"

Granling leaned back in his swivel chair. "He hasn't missed many bets. He knows that he has to give you an outlet. So he's put in a gate—and keeps it guarded night and day. He's brought in a bunch of hardcase hombres for that chore. He lets your boys go through on trips to town for supplies. That gives you an outlet. But there's a herd law which states that you can't drive a herd across a man's property without his permission."

"I'll haul 'em across in wagons!"

"How long would that take you? Half of your stock would be dead before you got around to them. And I don't think he'd let you do it anyway—he'd find some excuse to stop that. We could begin an action, but it would take six months to get it on the court docket, the way things are now. By the way, Burvell has made an offer for the Basin. I told him he'd have to make it to you."

"He did in that letter he sent me. Offered two-bits an acre! He can go to hell—and I'm not going to watch those critters starve, either. I'll get 'em out of there, if I have to—"

Granling held up his hand. "He's expecting that. He's had his whole crew deputized."

That jolted Landred. He suddenly remembered that Rawson had said something about being an officer of the law.

"What kind of a sheriff did that?" he demanded.

"Zack Franey."

"Franey! Why that loud-mouthed, whisky-swillin' son! What in the name of hell's happened to this county?"

"Folks elected the man that made the most noise, I guess," Granling said dryly. "He's going along with the crowd that can give him the most votes for reelection. That's human nature."

Landred winced; this threw a new light on his run-in with Ed Rawson. Swiftly, he told the attorney about it.

Granling agreed that it looked mighty like a deliberate trap, a scheme for Rawson to goad Landred, then either throw him into jail where he'd be entirely helpless, or kill him.

"You'd better get out of town," Granling said. "They may be looking for you. Take the back stairs. You can go down the alley to the back of the livery barn. I'm sorry I can't suggest any course of action, Ray. This thing has me stumped."

WHEN Landred rode out of Chinook Crossing, he wasn't taking it easy. He was boiling mad. Just as he left town he'd seen Zack Franey, followed by Rawson, come out of the Lucky Dollar and go legging to Granling's office. He'd been tempted to go back there and have it out with them, but there wasn't much he could gain by that. The thought of a lot of fine stock starving up there in the Basin because of the cussedness of men was heavy on his mind.

The road followed the south bank of the Lazy Man River, a deep, narrow, slow-moving stream that coursed down from the Basin, meandered through Burvell's Gunsight Valley. The moon was coming up. But the thick stand of willow brush that lined both banks of the river down here kept Landred from seeing the lights of Burvell's ranch.

He crossed the log bridge, broke into the open, topped a small rise and saw the whole story laid out before him. There was the valley, a steep-walled gash that thrust straight in among the peaks of the Sawtooths for maybe a mile, then elbowed to the north and continued for several more miles and ended in the Basin.

Burvell had thrown his fence across the valley at its outer end, where he could watch it from his ranch house. He'd put in a gate, where the fence crossed the road. Right near the gate there was a little fire, surrounded by the tiny black figures of at least a dozen men. The Rafter-B owner was taking no chances.

Landred brought his horse to a long, distance-eating lope. As he neared the gate, he sent a searching glance along the fence, from one steep valley wall to the other. The fence was plenty stout, a five-strand affair with husky posts set at twenty foot intervals. Where it crossed the river the willow brush had been cleared away for a hundred yards upstream and down.

Burvell's bunch saw Landred coming, of course. They spread out. When he pulled up his horse at the gate, Burvell was there to give him his one-sided grin.

Burvell was one of those hombres who seem to have been old from the start. Gaunt, stooped and hollow-cheeked, he regarded Landred over the barbed wire.

"Howdy, Playful. Got my letter, did you? Do we do business?"

"Not the way you had in mind, I reckon. I want through here."

The grin vanished from Burvell's seamed face. "Stacking 'er that way, eh? Well, I can't keep you from going through. Open the gate, boys."

Nothing more was said. The gate was opened. Landred rode through and on. But there was plenty of right, with the near-full moon shining on the snow, for him to notice that there were mighty few familiar faces in the bunch. Granling had been right about Burvell bringing in a hardcase crew.

Landred's mouth drew thin. A dozen men, all armed and willing to sling lead, probably more of them up at the house. A tough combination to buck in a showdown fight.

His horse was blowing, so he slowed the pace and looked down toward the snow-covered river. As a kid, he'd skated on that river. One year he'd fallen through a hole in the ice; knocked out, he'd come near freezing before old Mel Trent found him.

They'd expected to find him drowned. But a winter that began with a quick, hard freeze, would lay about a foot of ice on the river, and also freeze the springs up in the Basin. With no more water coming down, the river simply ran out from under the ice and left it hanging there.

There'd be no skating this year, though. Too much snow on the ice—and too many grimmer things confronting him.

OLD MEL TRENT, favoring his game leg, greeted Landred at the L-in-a-Box spread. The foreman was cordial, but solemn.

"It's hell, Ray. They poisoned our salt, burned our hay. Burvell knows they ain't but one way out of the Basin, except for a eagle. The side-grinnin' son has got us right where he wants us, an' he's clampin'—"

"How's the stock, Mel? Can the critters stand a drive?"

The old foreman looked startled. "Well—maybe. If they could be shoved along right easy-like. Mostly we kept the yearlin' stuff. An' last week we had us some luck for a change. Found some hay that'd been left in shock over back of Runnin' Deer Spring. Ray, what you figgerin' on?"

"We're getting those critters out of here, while they can still travel! Tonight!"

Trent's jaw sagged. "What kind of loco weed they got wherever you been? Nine men is all I got left—workin' cowhands, not gunslicks like Burvell's been bringin' in."

"We'll need 'em, old-timer! Roust 'em out. Have somebody round up all the lanterns on the place and some picks. You ornery old cuss, shake a leg, we're going through!"

"Going to fight them gunslicks with picks?" Trent protested. "In this moonlight, they'll see us a mile away, pick us off afore we can—" He broke off suddenly, peering keenly at Ray Landred's easy grin.

Then — maybe Landred's enthusiasm infected him—the old-timer let out a war whoop.

IT WAS nearly dawn when they bunched the herd just beyond Chinook Crossing. Old Mel Trent was complaining. "Never walked so far in my life! By hell, I never thought I'd make a drive like this'n. Figgered I'd seen everythin', but—"

"Hold it, old-timer," Landred broke in, peering back toward the mouth of the valley. He could just make out the thin line of riders who were sweeping down the road toward town. "They've seen us, boys. We'll have to leave the bunch here, leg it back into town pronto."

Burvell's crowd, following the road where the snow was packed in order to make better time, would have to go through the town in order to reach the L-in-a-Box herd. Landred had time to distribute his men in the town, and to rouse Giff Granling, before the first of the riders showed up.

Landred and the lawyer were pounding on Sheriff Zack Franey's door when the Burvell bunch hit town. Smiling a little, Landred stepped out into the street. "Hold it, gents!" he ordered.

Burvell and Ed Rawson, who was closely following his boss, reined their mounts. Rawson had a piece of cloth wound tightly around his right wrist, but he seemed to be able to use the hand pretty well. No bones had been broken, then.

Burvell's gaunt face was twitching. "Damn you, Playful, how'd you get those critters down here?"

"Maybe they sprouted wings."

"Maybe, hell!" Burvell lifted himself in his stirrups, reached for the .30-30 that he carried in a scabbard. "You lyin' whelp, you drove them critters across my land—though how you did it without us seein' you I don't savvy. Now, by hell, you'll either drive 'em right back where they come from, or we'll shoot every critter in the bunch!"

Landred's easygoing grin didn't slacken. He noticed that Zack Franey had come out onto his little porch and was buckling his gunbelt about his thick middle.

"Your play, Franey," he said to the sleepy-eyed sheriff. "I understand you've got all these men deputized. Now they're fixing to pull off an illegal act—you'll be responsible for whatever they do. Are you aiming to stop them?"

Franey blinked. He peered briefly at Burvell's bunch. Then he turned to Granling. "Am I hearin' this right? Has Playful got his stock out of the Basin?"

The lawyer nodded. "And he's got his rope on *your* hind leg now, I'd say."

Franey rubbed his jaw. "Well, there ain't much I can do but tell you to go back home, Burvell. Landred's got his cows out. You got no grounds to stomp him for that. All you can do is start a lawsuit, maybe."

"Damn you, Franey!" Burvell snarled. The Rafter-B owner was mad clear through, shaking with his fury. "You ungrateful whelp, get back in your of-

fice an' stay there! I'm handlin' this thing my way!"

"We're agreeable to that," Ray Landred stated. "I've got my boys distributed around town. There's Trey Moran, peekin' over the top of the hotel, an' Ling Cassidy on top of the livery barn. We've got you covered six ways for Sunday."

Burvell's long jaw sagged. He peered around, sizing up the play, and evidently finding it not to his liking.

His gunslicks did some looking too. Their horses, breathing little puffs of vapor after their long run, seemed to sense the general tension, and moved restlessly.

One of the gunslicks said suddenly, "I'm no damned fool! I'm gettin' out of here!"

He wheeled his mount, keeping his hand carefully away from his gun. The idea ran swiftly through the bunch, and they followed, leaving only Ed Rawson to side Burvell.

RAWSON'S mood was as black as that of his boss. The Rafter-B ramrod had a puffed lower lip, and his eyes were muddy with unreasoning hate. A shuddering quiver ran through his big frame. Then he went recklessly for his gun.

Landred's own weapon cleared the leather, bucked violently against his hand.

He heard the crash of Rawson's gun, felt the bullet tug at his mackinaw somewhere. But his slug had gotten there first. Rawson's body toppled limply from his rearing horse.

Burvell had his rifle out. But his mount was spooked and pawing air. Burvell had seen enough. He suddenly made up his mind, dropped the .30-30 and lifted his hands.

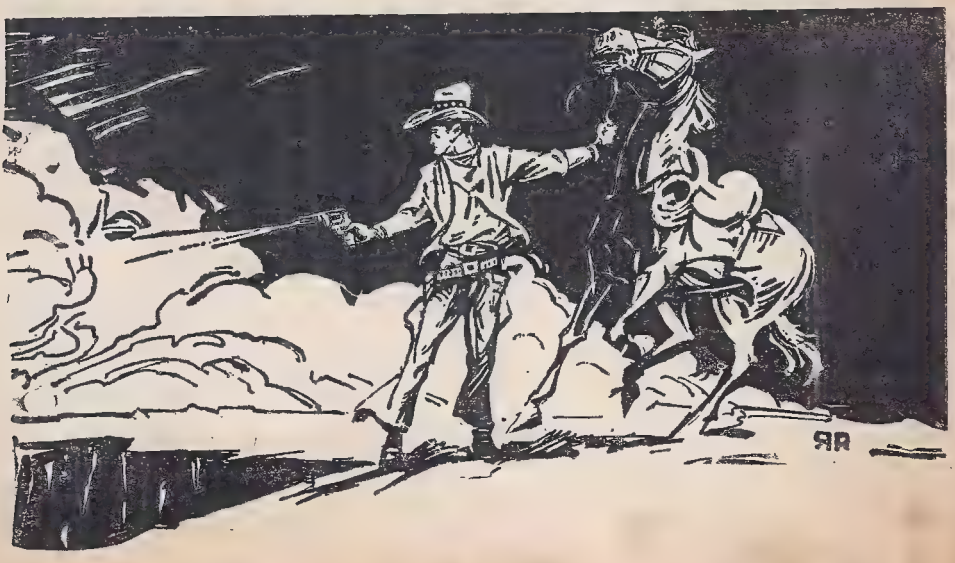
"All right," he said hopelessly. "You've got the face cards, Landred. But—how in hell'd you get those cows out?"

"Drove 'em down the river," Landred said.

"What? That's right in the open, and we'd have seen—"

"We made the drive *under* the ice. I remembered, from the time I fell through the ice when I was a kid, that there was a lot of room under there on a winter like this. We just drove 'em as near to your fence as we could without being seen, chopped down through the ice and went under. On the other side of the fence, we chopped out as soon as we could. Had to do some work, a place or two, but—"

Granling laughed dryly. "Burvell, you'll play hell suing him for trespass now. I'd have to look it up to be sure, but I think a river bed is classed as public domain, or something. And he drove them right under your nose!"



Young Sheriff Hyatt was strong on brains and brawn, but he had to listen to an old-timer's Colt counsel before he could . . .

Say It With Sixes

By Frank Triem

SHERIFF PAUL HYATT took his feet from the edge of the desk and sat up. A ragged-looking youngster was shuffling into the office, one grimy hand extending a yellow envelope.

"Thanks, sonny," Hyatt said. He fished in his side pants pocket and dug out a nickel, which he bestowed on his visitor. With the closing of the door, the sheriff's triangular face changed. As he sat staring at the envelope a mist of perspiration sprang out on his high, wide forehead, and his smoke-colored eyes were desperate.

The telegram was brief:

IKE CARNEY AND TWO MEN LEFT ON HORSEBACK THIS MORNING STOP HEADED YOUR WAY STOP BEST OF LUCK MARSHAL SID LENYARD

The young sheriff crumpled the paper. It slid from nerveless fingers to the floor. He got to his feet. He picked up a coiled gunbelt and heavy holster and six-gun. Buckling the outfit on, Hyatt left his office and headed down a hall lined on either side with steel gratings.

He stepped inside the last cell. Crossing to the cot, he slid the .45 from its holster and flipped open the loading gate. His lips moved as he rodded the cartridges from the cylinder. One, two, three, four, five, six. . . .

After he replaced the gun in its holster, he noticed a dark stain the size of a teacup on the wall below the window. Hyatt eyed this silently. Then suddenly he twisted, and his hand flashed to the six-gun. As it cleared leather, the massive hammer slid from under the web of his thumb.

Fast—but not fast enough. Sweat stood out on the man's face, gathered slowly in a big drop under his pointed chin. Again and again he holstered the .45, drew and fired at an imaginary enemy.

With an exclamation of despair, he dropped down on the edge of the cot. After more than a year of steady practice, the draw was still hurried, fumbling—and the sheriff knew that there was little chance of picking up the extra speed he was going to need late this afternoon.

Sheriff Hyatt leaned back against the wall, his smoke-gray eyes closed. His thoughts went back to the beginning of this affair.

TO THE people of Mojai County, the name of Hyatt had always stood for lethal efficiency with firearms. When the grizzled sheriff who had served them forty-two years went peacefully to sleep and forgot to wake up, they turned instinctively to the last of the Hyatts. Paul's older brother and his father had both been famous lawmen in their day.

"My mistake was in accepting the job," the sheriff reflected.

But there had been a reason for that, too. A year on a burned-out chunk of ground down the valley had forced upon him the conviction that he wasn't cut out to be a rancher.

He might have served his term without mishap, for the county was ordinarily a quiet one. However, he knew he was no hand with a six-gun—and so, when he thought he was alone, he had practiced the art of the draw. One day a gimlet-eyed saloon rat saw the sheriff patiently drawing and snapping the big Colt, realized the significance of what he saw, and went to the town troublemaker, Ike Carney.

From that moment on, a showdown had been inevitable. But when it came, young Sheriff Paul Hyatt moved in from an unexpected quarter, wrapped a gun-barrel around Ike's skull and dragged him by the heels to a room with bars on the window and a steel door.

"If old Judge Larkin had had the guts to give Ike the ten years he deserved, everything would have been okay," Sheriff Hyatt reflected. "Ike buffaloed him—got off with a year. The year was up last Thursday."

So now Ike was coming back, and the man who had caused Ike's downfall could do one of two thing. He could leave town on business and prolong it indefinitely—or he could stay and probably join old Sheriff Deagen behind the weathered little church. Hyatt stood up. His fingers felt cold and stiff as he shoved the cartridges back through the loading gate, snapped the latter shut, and holstered the .45.

Back in his office, he glanced at the pendulum clock. Hyatt swore under his breath. Eleven-thirty. He watched the minute hand crawl inexorably from one small black dot to the next, and a corner of his lip twisted.

Crossing the office, he studied his face in a cracked mirror attached to a last-year's calendar. There were little flabby pouches of skin under his eyes, and the labial furrows running from the corners of his short, straight nose down to the ends of his mouth were sunken. He looked haggard and afraid.

Hyatt forced himself to sit quietly in the chair. This nervous drifting about

the room had to stop. But there were moments of cold fear when he couldn't sit still.

"I don't want to die, now that I've so much to live for!" he thought.

Hyatt stood up, crossed the office and went outside. He stood on the porch of the stout brick building, with the warm sunlight pouring down on him, his uneasy eyes darting from one familiar object to another. Gradually, the feeling of utter hopelessness receded.

At times like this, it always helped Hyatt to get outdoors. Nothing seemed unendurable, with the sun shining down on him.

He became aware of the scattering of people. Some were watching him—and he knew that rumors of Ike's return were already circulating. Old Pete, the telegrapher, was an incurable gossip.

A LITTLE before noon, Sheriff Paul Hyatt went up the sagging plank sidewall to the unpainted three-room house of his deputy, Jeff Winters, at the end of the thoroughfare.

Molly Winters, old Jeff's niece, was watering the rosebushes with a discarded coffeepot. The hot clear sunshine struck coppery sparks from her hair. This morning she had done it in two braids, fastened at the ends with absurd little ribbons. She looked more like some youngster than a grown woman, but he knew there were depths of chilled-steel nerve back of the clear blue-gray eyes. When she wanted to, Molly could put on a meekly determined face that swept all opposition before her.

She set the chipped porcelain coffeepot down, and waved. She was waiting at the sagging gate as he turned in. After holding up a face smudged with garden loam to be kissed, Molly led the way up the path and into the kitchen through a side door. Hyatt followed, his eyes misty as he watched the bobbing pigtails.

"She's young and very beautiful," he thought. "She'll marry some good man—"

A spasm of pain convulsed his face. He knew that the thought should comfort him, but somehow it didn't.

In the kitchen, he washed at the white-painted bench by the door. Molly moved quietly about, setting the table for two—Uncle Jeff had eaten and departed. Her eyes rested from time to time on the lawman's face. Hyatt was trying to appear at ease, but he knew he wasn't fooling anybody.

"When is Ike supposed to reach town?" she asked casually, when they had seated themselves at the table.

Hyatt forgot about the slice of ham he had just speared. He sat with the meat suspended in mid-air, staring at the girl.

"How did you know?" he muttered hoarsely.

Molly's smile was enigmatic.

"Go on with your lunch, before it gets cold," she told him.

Molly wasn't eating much. Instead she sat with both elbows on the edge of the oilcloth, her chin cupped in her hands. She was talking steadily, ostensibly to him; but he realized that the girl was thinking out loud.

"We can be married right now and go away," she murmured. "That would be easiest. There's really nothing to hold us here. We could start housekeeping just as easy somewhere else."

In the silence that followed, the battered alarm clock on the shelf above the stove ticked loudly.

"I'm not running," Sheriff Paul Hyatt said at last. His voice sounded hoarse and strange in his ears.

Molly nodded. "I knew you'd say that," she whispered, her eyes shining.

He stood up at last. It was time he was getting back. He came around the table, gently took the stack of dirty dishes out of Molly's hands. His arms went around her.

"Good-by," he whispered. "You mustn't worry. There'll be two, at least, on my side. You and your Uncle Jeff. Your part will be to stay here where I can know you're safe."

Her eyes were dry as she lifted her face for the parting kiss, but felt Molly's fingers clutch convulsively, for just an instant, at his shoulders.

BACK in his office, Sheriff Paul Hyatt sat once more behind the roll-top desk and tried to plan some course of action. If only he could shake off this feeling of impending doom, and think clearly. . .

The door opened and a man with piercing gray eyes and hair thickly shot with white came in. Deputy Sheriff Jeff Winters was well along toward seventy, but his back was as straight and his carriage as erect as any man of twenty. As he came toward the desk, his steely eyes probed the young sheriff's soul.

"Something on your mind, Jeff?" Hyatt murmured.

Winters stared unwinkingly down. "I just heard Ike Carney's on his way back," he said. "Is that why you've been acting like you was scared stiff, this last week?"

Hyatt felt his face grow hot. It took an effort to meet the accusing stare of Molly's Uncle Jeff.

"Yes," he admitted.

Silence. Somewhere up against the ceiling, a bluebottle fly buzzed monotonously. Winters pulled up a chair and sat crosswise.

"You've changed since the day Molly said she'd marry you," he said slowly. "I think I know why. Before that, you just didn't give a damn." The older man stopped talking to watch a horse and buckboard wagon jog down the dusty street. "You've never swapped lead with a killer, have you, son?" he asked abruptly.

Hyatt shifted in his chair.

"Not yet," he admitted. His voice shook a little. "I've practiced hour after hour, Jeff. I just can't seem to get up enough speed. . . ."

His voice trailed out. Winters looked thoughtfully down at his big, blue-veined hands.

"I knew a very great lawman once," he said at last. "I remember hearing him say that the dangerous man was the one who took the extra fraction of a second to be sure. A smooth, unhurried draw—"

The old fellow stood up. He rested the tips of the fingers of one hand on the polished desk.

"I'm taking the afternoon off," he said, and there was a hard ring to his voice. "For Molly's sake—and for yours—I'm leaving you to work this thing out. I'll be in my garden if you need me."

He crossed the room and went out. With the sound of old Jeff's unhurried footfalls receding up the plank sidewalk, Hyatt felt as if the lid of his coffin had been slid into place. Two o'clock. A thin edge of sunlight crept across the clean-swept wood floor. The heat of midafternoon hung like a blanket over the town. Sheriff Hyatt stirred. He began going through his desk, cleaning out the drawers, discarding stuff for which another man would have no need, putting things in order so that the next sheriff would know what was what.

He was ready to go. He stood in the office door, looking around him for what might be the last time. His heart beat with a slow, jarring throb. Quietly he pulled the door shut.

The sheriff stod in the street, his head turning, smoke-gray eyes studying the false fronts across the way. Little knots of men had gathered in front of the open doors of business establishments. He could feel their eyes upon him. Women and youngsters had disappeared.

TURNING, Hyatt headed down the street. Seeing him coming, men he had known for years drifted casually into stores or crossed the way to talk to acquaintances. Hyatt realized that a curtain had dropped between him and these people who had elected him. He had never in his life felt more alone.

Light, quick steps—and suddenly an arm went through his. Molly carried a wicker grocery basket in the other hand. She looked up at him and grinned as casually as if nothing in the world could possibly be wrong.

"Walk with me to the store," she said lightly. "We're out of coffee. You're invited for supper, darling—a beautiful beef roast. Shall I cook the potatoes with it, or would you rather have them mashed?"

Something vibrant and alive radiated from the girl. He felt a slow warmth stealing through his heart and brain.

She went up the steps and across the loading platform of the General Store. At the open door she turned to wave. Hyatt waved and walked on to the foot of the street. He turned to glance back, thinking that Molly should have stayed home.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed. A dozen people were standing in front of his office. Hyatt strode swiftly back and pushed through the crowd. After that, for a long moment, he stood staring unbelievingly up the half-dozen steps at something wedged between the doorknob and the edge of the door.

A bouquet of roses—flowers for a sheriff, perhaps a funeral offering. . . .

"Who put those there?" he snarled.

"Some kid from below the tracks," a voice replied.

Hyatt's smoke-gray eyes began to glow. Suddenly he was laughing. It wasn't a pretty sound. He went up the stairs, snatched the flowers and flung them far out in the street.

"They can save that for Ike Carney!" he whispered.

As he shoved through the staring crowd he felt different from the way he'd felt in a long time. Fear had fallen from him like an ugly, outgrown scab.

The sun flattened itself on low hills to the west. Main Street looked deserted as the three men rode in from the south. Actually, the town had never been more awake. Curtains in windows stirred faintly; men drifted to the open doors of establishments, looked out, then disappeared.

Ike Carney rode in the lead. He was a compactly built man of medium height, with a big, dished face and a pair of red-rimmed eyes that were never still. Except for those eyes and the pointed ears, he might have been any casual drifter.

"Let's wet our whistles first," Carney said to his rough-looking companions. "I got all the time in the world."

He grinned, and the others guffawed. The three men angled off down the street, headed for the Owl Saloon. They dismounted, pushed through the batwing doors. A drunk sat tipped back in a straight-backed chair, over against one wall, snoring loudly. Behind the bar, a man with a hard, surly face was slowly polishing glassware. He nodded to the newcomers, took a bottle of whisky from the shelf behind him, and slid it up the bar. It went zipping past the three men. Ike Carney caught it as it slid over the edge.

"Punk shot, Mister," he commented.

The man in the apron nodded again and set out three glasses. No one spoke. In the corner, the drunk ceased his snoring. He stirred, said something in a flat, unintelligible voice, and relaxed.

Ike Carney downed his drink and wiped his thin lips on the back of his hand.

"You don't know offhand where I'd find the law?" he inquired.

The barkeep studied him with surly interest, folded the towel, and tossed it under the bar.

"The law is right behind you," he commented.

IKE came around fast. Sheriff Paul Hyatt had ducked under the batwing doors and had come noiselessly across the sawdust. He stood twenty feet away, his face devoid of expression.

"Heard you was looking for me, Ike," he said. "Mebbe you'd like me to beat your ears down again?"

The killer flushed. Hyatt advanced a step, and another. He stood still, his mocking voice lashing at the crouching figure by the bar.

"You've come home to die, Ike," the lawman commented. "Well, if you have to die, I suppose home's as good as any place."

Carney's red-rimmed eyes had widened, but now they were steady. His two companions had backed hastily off to one side.

Out in the street, a horse nickered. The last red sunlight sent a horizontal shaft through the space above and below the doors, turning the sawdust all down the length of the bar the color of blood.

Sheriff Paul Hyatt drifted in, smiling faintly; quiet confidence radiated from him. Suddenly Ike's red-rimmed eyes were uneasy, questioning. A side door of the saloon opened. Men were coming in, spreading out along the wall over to

the left. Ike Carney's face was shiny with perspiration.

Hyatt grinned. "A few friends I invited in to witness your demise, Ike," he said casually. "Don't worry, they won't interfere. This is our party—yours and mine. I wouldn't have it otherwise."

Ike licked his lips. Something had happened to the slim young fellow facing him since last they met, and the killer found suddenly that his rôle had changed from the hunter to the hunted. With a thin scream, he flung himself sidewise. His hand blurred as it stabbed back and down, up and forward.

Sheriff Hyatt, crouching ten feet away, reached almost casually for the big six-gun at his hip. As the muzzle pivoted forward, Ike Carney's weapon spouted smoke and flame. The bullet made a bloody welt along the lawman's temple. Hyatt's .45 lifted, the report blending in with the crash of the outlaw's gun to make a curiously elongated, drawn-out roar that filled the brain with thunder.

A ringing silence closed in. Sheriff Paul Hyatt steadied himself. He wiped a trickle of crimson out of his eyes. Ike Carney stood with his feet braced far apart. He tipped forward from the hips in a grotesque parody of a bow. A great red stain was spreading across his shirt. He hit the sawdust with a thud that rattled glassware on the ornate shelves behind the bar. . . .

Squatting at the end of a row of young cabbages, Jeff Winters looked at the tall slim man coming toward him, then stood up. The old deputy's probing eyes took in the look of serene strength on Paul Hyatt's face. Suddenly Jeff blinked and turned away.

Thair hands met in a tight hard grip.

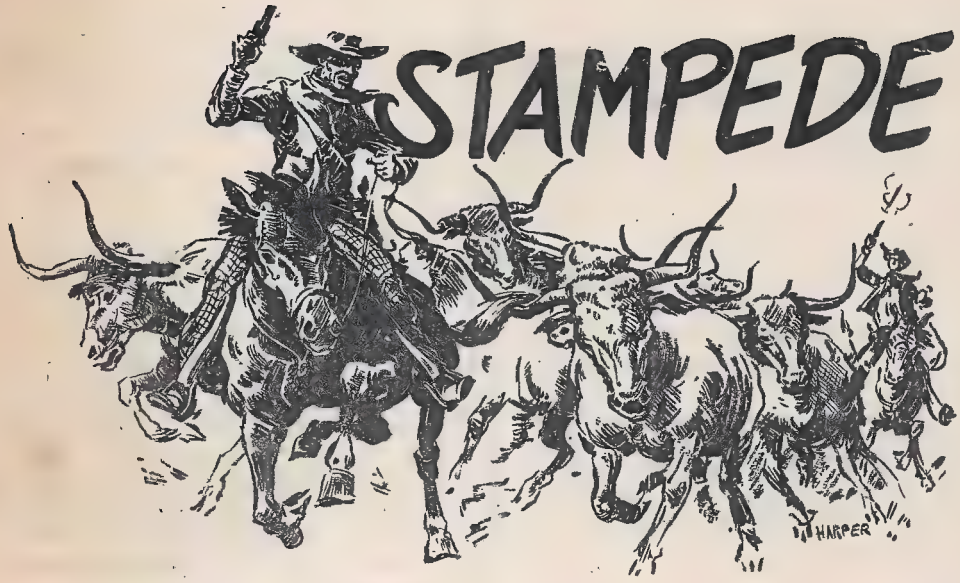
"I was sorry after I done it—about the flowers, I mean," Jeff said. "Molly suggested it. We knew we had to do something to make you mad."

Hyatt grinned. "I knew where they came from—and why," he replied. "Mebbe you hadn't realized it, Jeff, but yours are the only rosebushes in town in bloom." He was silent a moment. "The thing that really helped was what you said about being sure," he added. "When the showdown came, I took my time."

The old man drew his forearm across his eyes.

"I've aged ten years since I walked out on you," he muttered. "That was the hardest thing I ever done, Paul, but it just had to be that way. For both your sakes. Lawmen are made—not born."

Hyatt nodded. He turned as the screen door banged open, and Molly, her arms outstretched, came running down the row of tender green.



Where our reading and writing waddies get together with POWDER RIVER BILL

REIN up your broncs, pards, and mosey over to Powder River Bill's writin' roundup. Pen-pushers from all over the world are just honin' to tell you about faraway ranges and the folks who live on them. Rope yourselves some new amigos by sending in your letters to the Stampede department. You'll find plenty of hombres and gals who would like to exchange snapshots, souvenirs, and learn about your hobbies.

And, too, Powder River Bill wants to savvy the type of yarns you cotton to, so that you can read them in WESTERN TRAILS. Don't fail to state the names of your favorite authors to insure your getting tophand stories of the brand you prefer. You'll be interested in this month's lineup of writin' rannyhans.

Hurry and fill his mailbox.

Dear Bill:

I've read WESTERN TRAILS for a long time. It is one of my favorite magazines. I'm seventeen years old, weigh 135 pounds, and five feet, seven inches tall.

Please, all you girls and boys, write to me. I'll answer all letters. I hope to see my name and address in the *Stampede*.

How about more stories by W. L. Covert. I liked "A Renegade Sides the Law" very much.

Adios,

AMOS WATTS, JR.
Baker, Ark.

Swap snapshots with a city gal.

Dear Bill:

I am a girl, aged twenty-nine, five feet, four inches tall, and weigh 116 pounds. I have brown hair and gray-blue eyes. I like dancing, movies, writing letters, and receiving them. Will be pleased to exchange snapshots.

I have been reading WESTERN TRAILS for some time now and enjoy all the stories. I'd like to hear from some of the other readers.

AUGUSTA PETERSON
424 E. 138th St.
Bronx, N. Y. C.

Pen-pushers, send a line to Betty.

Dear Bill:

I read every Western book I can find, and it's needless to say that I like WESTERN TRAILS the best. In other words, it rates tops with me.

I was wondering if there was room for me in the *Stampede* department. I have often tried to go out West, but since it's impossible, I would like to hear from some cowboys and ranch girls—both are welcome.

My hobbies are reading, letter writing, collecting songs, snapshots, and making new

PARDNER PETE'S Bunkhouse Bulletin

Pen Pards who would like an ink sketch of their snapshot send it to—

DAVID JEROME
539 Brompton Place
Chicago, Ill.

Pen Pards who would like cowboy songs write to

VICTOR MARKS
7127 S. Washtenau Avenue
Chicago, Il.

Pen Pards who would like poetry written about their picture send it to—

CHARLES J. HERBERT, JR.
c/o Victor St. James
Whittemore, Michigan

—and—

STANLEY C. DeCAMP
c/o Gen'l Delivery, Galion, Ohio

friends. I also like to go to movies and listen to the radio. My favorite sport is fishing.

I am a country girl, twenty years old, and have black hair and gray eyes. I am five feet, three inches tall.

So come on, pals, throw some ink my way!

BETTY L. HOLDERFIELD
Route 1, Box 581
Mounds, Ill.

Drop a line to a lonesome farm girl.

Dear Bill:

I am a new reader of WESTERN TRAILS and think all the stories are tops. I would like to hear from some pen pals from all over. I have blue eyes, blond hair, weigh 130 pounds. I am seventeen years old, and five feet, four inches tall.

So come on, boys and girls, drop a line to a lonesome farm gal.

Adios,
IRENE HACKBARTH
R.R. 2
Hector, Minn.

Give this sodbuster a break.

Dear Bill:

I have just finished another WESTERN TRAILS magazine and enjoyed every story. I read all kinds of Westerns, but I like WT best of all.

I would like to exchange letters and snapshots with a lot of pen pards. I have brown, wavy hair, blue eyes, and weigh 164 pounds. I am eighteen, and am five feet, ten inches tall. I like to hunt, fish, and go boating.

Come on, pards, write to this old sodbuster. I hope to make my letters interesting.

HARLEY LINN
R. 1
Vermillion, Kans.

Get on your broncs, amigos!

Dear Bill:

I am not a newcomer to your magazine. Have been reading WESTERN TRAILS since 1938 and enjoy the magazine very much.

I am thirty and would like to hear from people from eighteen to seventy-five. My hobbies are, first, writing, then art and card collecting, or deltiology. I was once a trick rider in a Wild West show and traveled with it through the Northwest. I love horses and often ride.

Will be glad to exchange photos. All letters will be answered promptly, so come on, amigos, fill my mailbox to overflowing.

FRANCES M. KINCAID
621 E. Thornton Ave.
Des Moines 15, Ia.

An' listen, folks, don't forget to send in your ballots. Here's the ballot. Just mark "1" — "2" — "3" — "4" — an' so on, in the order of your likin'.

Adios, amigos—till next time.

Tophand Author's Ballot

WESTERN TRAILS
23 West 47th Street New York, N. Y.

J. EDWARD LEITHEAD *Roundup of the Plundering Shotwells*	
JOSEPH CHADWICK *Blizzard Boomerang*	
KENNETH L. SINCLAIR *Trail of the Invisible Herd*	
FRANK TRIEM *Say It With Sixes*	
WILSON L. COVERT *Calaboose Cache*	
D. B. NEWTON *Cowpoke on a Pistol Payroll*	
GIFF CHESHIRE *.45 Merrymaker*	
WILLARD LUCE *Four Horsemen from Hades*	

Name .....
Address .....

For the protection of our readers, WESTERN TRAILS reserves the right to open all Pen Pard mail passing through our hands.

Calaboose Cache

By Wilson L. Covert

Though his pop had been murdered, trigger-toting was still outlawed in Lodestone when Con Bisbee rode home. So this hard-shooting avenger had to head for the calaboose before he could carve his dad a Colt memorial.

THE signboard said, *Check Your Gun With the Sheriff As You Ride In.* It stood out prominently at the west entrance of Lodestone, and there was a similar sign at the east side of town. Con Bisbee passed it with a careless glance; his companion, Lish Grover gave a surprised grunt.

"That thing wasn't there the last time I was in Lodestone!"

Bisbee said, "Thought you told me you were a stranger hereabouts."

Grover didn't appear flustered. "It's so long since I rode through, I'm practically a stranger. But I remember this town was pretty wild then."

"Times change," observed Bisbee, "but it must have been wild enough on a certain afternoon three weeks ago when the Shag Toner gang cleaned the bank. My

old man got his ticket that day, cuttin' down on 'em."

"Peace officer?" asked Grover.

"Hardware dealer," replied Con. "Ben Bisbee's store was one of the first built in Lodestone. I've been away for two years, punchin' cattle. Wish I'd been around. Old Ben was a strong law and order man."

"Yeh?" said Grover, and fell silent as their horses' hoofs stirred up the yellow dust of the main street. His eyes darted from side to side, taking in the townfolk with a wary attention. He was an older man than Bisbee, but both were clean-shaven, wiry of build, with the stamp of seasoned range riders upon them.

Con viewed the familiar scene with a rising lump in his throat, a mingling of pleasure and pain because the old man wouldn't be there to welcome him. They were nearing the weatherbeaten jail when a man with a shiny badge ambled out, throwing up a hand to halt them. Con remembered Hack Farrell as a wrangler at the stage company's corral. A smile of recognition lighted up Farrell's face as the riders pulled toward the curb.

"Expectin' you'd show up any day after gettin' word, Con," he said. "Tough about your father. Everyone who owned a shootin'-iron grabbed it that day to tie into the gang, that is, everyone but Sheriff Newlin. He wasn't on hand, and we ain't seen him or his deputy since. We think the Toner gang drygulched 'em before ridin' into town."

At this point, Lish Grover eased his stiff posture in the saddle.

"Then you're actin' sheriff, Hack?" Bisbee asked.

The other nodded. "Till they hold an election. Let me have your guns, you two. City fathers passed an ordinance against gun-totin' a few days after the bank robbery. Also a law prohibitin' the sale of firearms and ammunition in Lodestone. You see, there's plenty of owl-hooters roamin' the hills, and old Ben's store was a source of supply to robbers as well as honest fellers.

"If a man wanted to buy a gun or a box of shells, it wasn't up to your father to ask what he aimed to use 'em for. The very bullet that downed Ben undoubtedly come off his own shelves. So the town lawmakers figured one way to stop future raids—here or on the range trails—was to stop the sale of war materials, make every rider check his gun the minute he hit town. That holdup almost busted Lodestone."

"Seems like lockin' the stable door after the horse has been stolen," commented young Bisbee. "What's to prevent owlhooters from buyin' what they need some other place?"

"It's a long ride in any direction to another town that boasts a hardware store," replied Farrell. "I ain't sayin' the plan will work, but at least it won't be so easy for the bad hats to go gunnin' in this section."

Con tossed his gun to Hack.

Grover leaned toward the sheriff and said, "If you're short of lawmen, maybe you'd like to hire a first-class deputy. I've toted a badge—"

Farrell shook his head. "Got one deputy. That's all they allow me. I'll take your shootin'-iron, pardner."

Grover, looking disgruntled, reached back for his gun. As the sheriff raised his hand to take the weapon, extended butt-first, Lish whirled it on a finger hooked in the trigger guard, the old road agent's spin. "Guess I'll keep the gun," he chuckled at Farrell's frown.

Bisbee, throwing a bleak look at Grover, slyly unshipped his left boot from the stirrup. Their horses stood close together and he prodded Lish's mount sharply behind the cinch. The bronc jumped. Grover, caught off-balance, grabbed the horn to save himself from sunning his spurs. His gun-arm was lowered, and Bisbee, kicking his own horse to keep alongside the other animal, shot a hand to Lish's wrist and wrenched. The six-shooter spilled between the two horses. Sheriff Farrell leaped from the sidewalk to scoop it up while the riders reined in.

Grover glared at Bisbee, sputtering, "Why, you—"

"We can settle it outside sometime, if I've hurt your feelin's," Bisbee said coolly.

Farrell said, "Looks like you're trav-

elin' around in hard company, Con."

"He's no friend of mine," denied Bisbee. "We just happened to ride the same trail into town. Says his name's Lish Grover."

Farrell sharply scrutinized the angry rider. "I don't know him. Better make it a short stay, Grover. Get this smoker on your way out."

Grover pushed back his hat and swallowed hard. "I didn't mean nothin'. It's just that I ain't used to goin' without my gun. I need a drink."

AS HE rode up the street, Bisbee said to the sheriff, "See you later, Hack," and reined his horse in the same direction. But he had no intention of overtaking Grover. Con's objective was the hardware store which bore his father's name in foot-high letters across the front. Before Con had quit the saddle, the well-rounded figure of a girl appeared at the door.

"So you got my letter, Con?" she exclaimed, smiling. "I wasn't sure you were still at the Whaley ranch."

"Yes," said Con. "It's nice to see you again, Alice."

He noticed how the sun, slanting across the doorway, struck glints from her high-piled hair. Alice Medford had grown prettier, if anything, in the two years since Con had left his home town. She hadn't been clerking in old Ben's store then. He saw her appraising him as he crossed the sidewalk and hastily dusted himself with his black Stetson.

"Terribly sorry I had to write such bad news," Alice went on. "I never worked for anyone so kind and considerate as your father, and I feel his loss deeply. They buried him in the town cemetery."

Con said soberly, "I'll ask you to go out there with me later. I have a score to settle with Shag Toner's gang, Alice."

She nodded. "I understand, Con. It'll be risky. What about the store? I kept it open till I saw you, though sales have fallen off badly since they passed an anti-gun law."

"Farrell told me about it," replied Bisbee. "I think a better plan would be to rub out the owlhooters. Newlin couldn't have been much of a lawman." He entered the store with Alice, glanced about. "I thought of sellin' the business and buyin' a brand of my own. What did you do with the stock of guns and ammunition on hand?"

"Hack Farrell removed it to the jail." Alice's face was grave. "I don't believe you'll find a buyer soon. All I've sold today was a keg of nails. If you want to visit the cemetery now, I'll get my hat."

It was but a short walk, and Con left his horse in front of the store. When he and Alice returned a half hour later, a bunch of riders were dismounting at the hitchrack. As the men trooped inside, Con and Alice quickened their pace, the girl shading her eyes against the westering sun.

"Hands from one of the ranches, I guess. What can they want?"

When she and Con walked into the store the men faced about impatiently at the counter. They all wore guns, though they had had to pass the sheriff's office to reach the hardware store. Con and the girl looked in vain for a familiar face in the unshaven, dusty group. One dark-skinned man with a curling black mustache fastened beady eyes on Alice.

"Bisbee's clerk, ain't you? Want a dozen boxes of .45 shells."

"Sorry, but we're not permitted to sell ammunition of any kind," said Alice. "It's a new law."

"Law, eh?" sneered the fellow. "We're ridin' through on our way south and we need cartridges. Got some behind the counter, mebbe?"

The girl shook her head. "Not a box anywhere in the store."

"You might have a little trouble with the sheriff, friend, if he catches you totin' iron in town," added Con. "That's a new law, too."

The whole group shifted eyes to young Bisbee. The dark-skinned man growled, "We saw that sign, but we never pay no mind to signs, bud. Who're you?"

"Ben Bisbee's son," answered Con. "I'm lookin' for the gang that killed the old man the day of the bank robbery."

The announcement made no impression

that Con could discern, though he was wondering if they were some of the Toner wild bunch.

"Take a look for them shells, Champa," one man suggested.

"I'll do that," said Champa, swinging up on the counter. "The girl could be lyin'."

BISBEE, wishing he had his gun, didn't hesitate. He grabbed Champa's nearest leather-clad leg before he could slide over the counter, gave a yank that brought him crashing to the floor.

"When Miss Medford tells you anything, Champa, it's so!" grated Bisbee. "Get up and apologize!"

Alice's startled gaze lifted from the swearing Champa to his companions. She expected them to draw on the weaponless Con, was frightened for one of the few times in her life. But they waited for Champa to rise, which he did quickly, flinging hand to holster. Bisbee lunged, right arm pistoning.

At the crack of fist meeting jaw, Champa reeled against the counter, his eyes glassy, and crumpled to his former position on the floor. Jackknifing beside him, Con jerked out Champa's gun, and in that posture covered his wrathful mates. Their hands, sliding to scabbards, froze.

"Hold that pose!" rapped Con, and watched Champa out of the tail of his eye until he showed signs of reviving. Con helped the man to his feet prodded him with his own gun. "Speak your piece, Champa!"

The latter mumbled an apology, never taking his baleful eyes from Bisbee. His men preceded him through the door, then Con pushed Champa out on the sidewalk, hurled his gun after him. Con stood ready to slam the door if the outfit turned on him, but, casting dark glances his way, they swung to saddles and trotted up the street.

Alice Medford's voice said, "I thought they'd kill you!"

Con wheeled. "Why, you're shakin', Alice! Buck up! But you see what I mean. It ain't safe for honest men to go gunless in town. Sheriff couldn't have noticed those fellows. I'll get him—and my gun."

He started jailward at a run. But Farrell and his deputy weren't there. Con found his six-shooter, hit the street again. Far up, on the other side, he saw Champa and his friends entering the saloon. He headed that way, asking the first man he met if he knew the sheriff's whereabouts. The citizen pointed toward the saloon.

Bisbee, hurrying on, had no doubt he had been correctly informed when heavy detonations assailed his ears. Champa's crowd were just the kind to refuse to check their hardware.

Bisbee arrived at the saloon door as powdersmoke drifted outward. Crouching, he peered under the batwings. Farrell and another man, evidently his deputy, lay prone on the floor. Champa and his pals were regarding the fallen peace officers over smoke-wisping pistols. Every patron but one seemed to have taken cover. Lish Grover stood at the far end of the bar, watching the killers with narrowed eyes.

Con shouldered through the batwings, barking, "I'll drop the first man that moves!"

The eyes of the Champa gunmen switched to the half-crouched figure by the wall. The urge to swivel Colts on Bisbee showed in their tense faces. Champa stood foremost, his body partly screening a short, chunky man. Flame burst from the latter's gun muzzle, the unexpected shot causing Champa to start aside. The thickset man was exposed to view as his bullet raked Bisbee's hip. Con tripped his hammer and the chunky pistoleer toppled forward.

Boots scraped as the powder blasts smashed the tension. A gun pounded, and another, as the rest of the gang backed toward the bar. Spurts of fire lanced from Bisbee's corner. One of Champa's men yelled.

A figure darted from the far end of the bar, hit the floor beside the dead sheriff. Lish Grover, fisting Farrell's .45, pitched a shot at the smoke-wreathed gang, his voice cutting through the gun thunder:

"There's two of us now! We'll wipe you out if you don't cave!"

Champa, flat against the bar, threw a savage look at Grover. "What you takin' cards for?" he roared. Grover's answer was in the form of a bullet that scored Champa's cheek. He tossed his Colt down, lifted his hands. After a brief hesitation, Champa's men followed his example. Con flicked a surprised glance at Grover as the latter rose up, saying:

"Reckon we'd better get 'em to jail, Bisbee."

"Reckon we had," said Con, and moved in step with Grover toward the men with upraised hands.

As Bisbee and Grover locked the sullen gunmen in two separate cells, Mayor Findlay and other important citizens arrived posthaste. "You're the fightin' son of your father, Con," cried the excited mayor. "It was a stroke of good fortune you returned today. With Farrell and his deputy gone, we need someone else to wear a badge. What about you?"

A law badge, thought Con, would be a help rather than a hindrance in running down the Toner gang. He nodded. "You can swear me in."

Grover's elbow prodded Con. "You'll need a deputy, Bisbee."

"So I will," agreed Con. "Swear us both in, Mr. Mayor."

Bisbee was still puzzled about Grover, didn't fully trust him, although the man had rendered signal aid in the saloon fight. When the mayor and townsmen had departed, Con asked, "Why'd you chip in, Lish?"

"I asked Farrell to take me on, didn't I?" Grover returned with a grin. "I got ambitions to be a lawman. Saw my chance there in the barroom forgettin' I was mad at you." His answer failed to satisfy Con entirely.

THE sun had gone down and Alice was locking up for the night when Con returned to the store. Accompanying the girl to the cottage where she lived with her widowed mother, he told her he had stepped into Hack Farrell's boots.

"I trust you won't come to poor Farrell's end," Alice said, a little anxiously. "They thrust the job on him for conspicuous bravery, just as in your case. During the bank robbery, Farrell shot down the outlaw who was carrying the loot. He'd have recovered the money if two more masked bandits hadn't spurred out of an alley and made away with the sacks."

"I'm not worried," smiled Con, "but I wish I was a little more certain of the man I've got for a deputy. Tomorrow I'm askin' all the townsmen to take a look at that gang and see if they recognize 'em."

But Lodestone's citizens couldn't identify the prisoners as members of the Shag Toner outfit. Farrell, if anyone, should have known them, but Con learned from a bartender that the fight had started when the sheriff ordered them to check their guns. That night, leaving Grover in charge at the calaboose, Bisbee stepped out to the saloon for a beer. Coming back, his step quickened as he heard a commotion inside the old jail building.

Bisbee drew his gun as he mounted the stoop. He caught the hurried clack of peg heels in the office, dimly lit by a kerosene lamp. With one foot across the door sill, Con was suddenly blinded by the blaze of a gun. As he recoiled, a rushing body struck him, hurling him out of the doorway. Con fired, but was sure he hit nothing, for he was going sideways off the stoop.

Above the thud of running feet, two Colts roared as he pitched to the ground. One slug swiped him on the side of the head. Everything was hazy for a few moments. When Con picked himself up, he could hear horses galloping, men shouting, an occasional shot.

A wild-eyed citizen pelted along the sidewalk. "Hey, Bisbee, them killers are gettin' away! Grabbed horses at the racks. Why ain't you after 'em?"

"I will be," returned Con grimly, snatching up his fallen hat, "soon as I learn how they broke out. This is what comes of your anti-gun law!"

With dark thoughts of Lish Grover, he hastened into the jail office. He saw at a glance that the Champa gang had recovered their six-guns and turned to the cell corridor. Someone was groaning

in the first cell, the door of which stood open. The door of the adjoining cell was likewise ajar.

The sprawled form of Grover stirred, raising a bloody face to Con as he looked into the first cell, asking sharply how the prisoners had got loose. Lish pointed to a hole in the floor, near the back wall. Two planks had been removed.

"I caught 'em diggin' their way out," explained Lish. "One of the bunch must've had a knife in his bootleg that we missed. I lit into 'em, layin' about with my Colt barrel, but Port Champa tripped me. They all piled on, then, beat me most to death. In my hurry, I forgot to lock the cell door. Of course, they got out, takin' my keys to release the fellers in the next cell."

Bisbee helped his deputy into the office. Grover had been roughly handled, and Con believed he had tried to stop the jailbreak. After all, if Lish was a friend of the Champa outfit, it would hardly make sense for him to assist in their capture, on the chance of helping them to escape later on.

"Wash up, Lish," said Con. "We're trailin' 'em while the trail's hot."

"I can't ride," protested Grover. "Feel like my head is bashed in."

"There's nobody else to go with me," retorted Con. "You'll be okay."

LISH complained every step of the way to the town corral, where they saddled horses. By fast riding, they caught a glimpse of the fugitive gunmen on a far ridge, north of Lodestone. But trailing in the dark was difficult. The lawmen lost sight of the gang several times and Grover aroused fresh suspicion in Con's mind by wanting to give up the chase.

Bisbee's persistence was rewarded when, somewhere in the outlying hills, the gang halted at a lonely cabin. A light suddenly glowed in a window, proving that the gunmen were not aware they had been tracked to their hideout.

Bisbee and Grover drew rein some distance from the cabin.

"Wish we'd overtaken 'em in the open," said Con. "It won't be easy to jump the gang in that shack. I'll Injun over and see if they start drinkin' or hit the bunks. We'd have the edge, then."

"I'll wait here with the broncs," said Lish. "Don't feel so good."

Bisbee noiselessly approached the cabin. Standing to the right of the window, he peered inside. A quart bottle was making the rounds of the men, but that interested him less than what Port Champa was saying:

"Imagine Lish Grover, Shag Toner's right-hand man, wearin' a law badge! It's only three weeks since the bank robbery and he sure took a chance of bein' recognized. Can't understand why he chipped in against us in the saloon, or why he fought so hard to keep us from diggin' out."

"I heard the Toner gang lost the bank loot after they got it," spoke up another outlaw.

"Yeh," said Champa. He looked thoughtfully at the tumbler in his hand, half-filled with whisky. "The loot and Sheriff Newlin both disappeared. Wonder if there's any connection . . . . Say, we'll ride over to the Toner hideaway come mornin', prod 'em with a few questions. Maybe Shag don't know his lieutenant has turned lawman, but if he does, there's a reason for it—somethin' to do with that lost bank loot. In a way, I'm sorry we had to shoot Farrell and his deputy. Makes us marked men in Lodestone. But we've pulled too many holdups to gamble on lettin' our guns get out of reach."

In thoughtful mood, Bisbee stole back to the waiting Grover. He had changed his mind about tackling the Champa gang that night. But he didn't tell Lish he knew he was Shag Toner's right-hand man.

"We'll let them lead us to the Toner hideout in the mornin', Lish," he told his outlaw deputy. "That's the gang I want most of all."

"What they goin' there for?" demanded Grover uneasily.

"Accordin' to Champa," replied Con, "that bank money got away from the Toner gang followin' the robbery. Champa figures he can drag somethin' out of Shag Toner and get it for himself."

Grover's silence indicated this was anything but good news. They moved the horses back to brush cover. Bisbee didn't shut his eyes for the balance of the night, not knowing what Grover would do if he caught him off guard. Near dawn, the outlaw deputy said:

"Con, if you're keen to corral that Toner gang, it'd be best to stop Champa's outfit a little this side of Shag's hideout. Must be plenty of good places for bushwhackin'. If the two bands are allowed to get together, we won't stand no show at all."

"Maybe you're right," said Con, wondering what was back of Grover's proposal. He appeared to agree to it, both of them hitting the trail behind the Champa gang when the latter rode west after sunup.

AFTER an hour of trailing through the hills, Bisbee knew they must be nearing the Toner hideout from the way Grover kept forging ahead. He cautioned Lish several times, puzzled by the outlaw's apparent anxiety over a meeting of the owlhoot gangs. As they topped a low hill, Grover leveled an arm toward a log dwelling squatting in the lee of another hill, a mile away.

"Must be the Toner hangout," he said, as if he didn't know it. "Port Champa and his men are 'bout a quarter mile ahead of us. By spurrin' hard we can reach that bend yonder and open up—"

"A better way," Con broke in, "will be to let 'em fight it out. I'm sure they'll fight, for Champa won't hesitate to use guns to get the information he wants. If we just let 'em fly at it, we'll have fewer to face in the end."

"Not my idea of handlin' it!" blared Lish, a savage look coming into his face, his right hand slashing down.

Bisbee shaded him on the draw. "Ride downhill, Lish," he ordered. "I'm bossin' this job. Since you want to be a hindrance instead of a help, I'm goin' to tie you up."

"Fine way to treat your deputy!" snarled Lish, turning his horse.

At the foot of the hill, both dismounted, and Con tied Grover with his own rope, then swung back in the saddle. He rode on after the Champa gang, stopping where cover afforded by the hills petered out. He watched Champa and his men jog toward the Toner cabin.

Two heavily armed men quickly appeared at the door. Seeing who was coming, they waited to greet the visitors and usher them inside. Five, ten minutes passed without the sound of a gunshot. Con began to think he had figured wrong when the muffled reports of six-shooters reached him.

The cabin door opened again. Champa and his pals filed out, holstering guns, none of them apparently injured. They mounted and turned back the way they had come. Con kicked his horse around the shoulder of the nearest hill. The killers were in a jubilant mood as they trotted by within earshot.

"That visit sure paid dividends, boys," the leader chuckled. "We'll profit where they didn't. Night's the best time to surround that jail. Nobody in town but Bisbee and Grover totin' guns. It's not surprisin' Lish was upset when we started to dig out. Too bad we didn't know then what we do now."

As their hoofbeats died out, Bisbee reined away from the hill and pointed for the Toner cabin. He was ready to jerk iron if a shot greeted his appearance, but he didn't believe there was anyone left alive to shoot.

The minute he entered the cabin, he saw he was right. Two dead men lay on the floor, the two he had seen at the door. Probably one was Shag Toner, though Con hadn't known him. There were dead men in each of a half dozen bunks, four with bandaged wounds received at an earlier date than the ones inflicted by the late visitors.

The fifth and sixth men, Con recognized. Sheriff Newlin and his deputy. The latter was bound hand and foot, but only Newlin's arms were tied. His feet were bare, showed signs of having been badly burned. Salve had been smeared on the soles.

"Tortured by Shag Toner to make him talk," muttered Con. He was thinking of what Alice Medford had told him of

the two masked men who had ridden out of the alley to pick up the loot dropped by the bandit Farrell had shot. "You paid high for bein' false to your oath, Newlin."

CON was glad to get out of that shambles and hit leather again. He understood now the reason for Grover's anxiety. Lish knew that just two of the Toner gang were in shape to fight Champa and his pals. The bank robbers hadn't carried away any loot but plenty of gunshot wounds that afternoon three weeks ago.

When Bisbee reached Grover and told him the Toner gang was no more, Lish received the news quietly. He knew he he was in a spot if Con suspected him.

Bisbee began to untie the outlaw. "I found the missin' Sheriff Newlin and his deputy there, both dead," said Con, but Lish didn't bat an eye. "I let the Champa gang go by because we're likely to meet 'em again soon. Champa spoke of attackin' the calaboose, probably tonight. Must be somethin' there that they want pretty bad."

Grover said quickly, "It's us, Con! They want revenge for what we did to 'em. I'll stand by you, feller."

Bisbee smiled thinly, handing him his gun. "Get on your horse, Lish. We'll hit for town and prepare a warm welcome."

Arriving in Lodestone, Con went alone to see Mayor Findlay. His honor was aghast to learn of Sheriff Newlin's fate. "You won't be troubled by Shag Toner's gang again," said Con, "and tonight, if I'm not mistaken, you'll have a chance to finish the last of the owlhooters. Grover and I will need help. Would you and the other townsmen take guns and fight, forgettin' that anti-gun law, if you knew you could recover the bank money?"

Mayor Findlay gasped. "Where is it, Con? Sure, we'll fight with you!"

"That's all I want to know," said Con. "There were enough guns and ammunition taken from my old man's store to arm most everyone in Lodestone. Have your fightin' men call at the jail, will you?"

As night fell, there was an undercurrent of excitement in Lodestone. Women and children had been warned to keep indoors. Alice Medford was at home with her mother, but her thoughts were with Con Bisbee, up at the jail. Hearing hoofbeats, she glanced from a living-room window at dim horsebackers going by and said to her mother, "They've come! It should be over soon." There was a prayer on her lips as she turned from the window.

Standing in the jail office with Grover, Bisbee heard the riders, too. He nodded to Lish, whose apparent eagerness to defend the jail hadn't fooled Con for a minute. Lish blew out the lamp, trailed after Con to take his stand at one of the two front windows. Hoofs stilled in the street as the light went out.

From his window, Con saw the outlaws dismount and come forward slowly. Boots clumped on the stoop and a fist fell on the door. A voice called, "Hey, sheriff!"

"Get off the stoop, Champa!" replied Bisbee. "We know what you're after!"

"Has that blasted Grover—" began Champa, interrupting himself to squeeze trigger as he glimpsed Con's head.

The bullet splintered the windowsill and Bisbee's Colt answered. Champa spun half around and sank on the stoop. Gunflame spat from the sidewalk, where his men were posted. Lead thudded against the jail front, some of it going through the windows. The Colts of Bisbee and Grover replied steadily, and suddenly the din was increased by the bellow of guns in the street, behind the outlaws. They were caught between two fires.

EASING back on his heels to reload, Con threw a glance at the opposite window. The dark outline of Grover wasn't there. Shoving the last cartridge in his .45, Bisbee stole back toward the cell corridor. The door was partly closed, but as he pushed it wide, he saw Grover by the light of a lamp in the first cell. On his knees, the outlaw was lifting money sacks from a hole in the floor. He leaped up, wild-eyed and holding his gun at hip level as Con spoke from the open cell door.

"While the Lodestone citizens are finishin' off the Champa gang, you figured

you'd get away with the bank loot, eh, Lish? I was puzzled for some time by your eagerness to be a lawman. You wanted to get into the jail, where you knew Sheriff Newlin had cached the money after hijackin' it from the Toner gang. They must have recognized him and his deputy despite their masks that day."

"Shag did," snarled Grover. "We captured 'em a little later, but they'd had time to get rid of the loot. Newlin thought he saw a chance to get rich at our expense. Wouldn't tell where he'd hid the money till Shag toasted his feet over a fire."

"Then Shag sent you to town to recover it. You helped me out with the Champa gang to get yourself a badge and have access to the cache. When the prisoners pried up the floorboards to escape, you were afraid they'd discover it. If I hadn't insisted on your ridin' with me last night, Lish, you'd have been off with the bank loot before I got back."

"I sure would!" gritted Grover. "And I'm gettin' it yet. We've got the drop on each other, but it was the same way when I shot your old man—"

Con's gun smoked, cutting him short. Grover staggered, rocked his hammer-prong, but the bullet hit the side of the cell. With hard eyes Con watched the Colt slip from Lish's fingers. He toppled, narrowly missing the hole in the floor.

Out in the street there was yelling but no shooting, and that clamor of voices, to Con's ears, had a triumphant note. He hurried to unlock the office door. The Lodestone citizens, led by the mayor, swarmed in. Con led them to the lighted cell and pointed:

"There's your bank money and the last of the Shag Toner outfit. For the time bein', the hills are clean of owlhooters. But more will come. What you need to protect yourselves from 'em is an honest sheriff, not anti-gun laws. No town on this frontier can safely disarm until it's a lot more tame than it is right now."

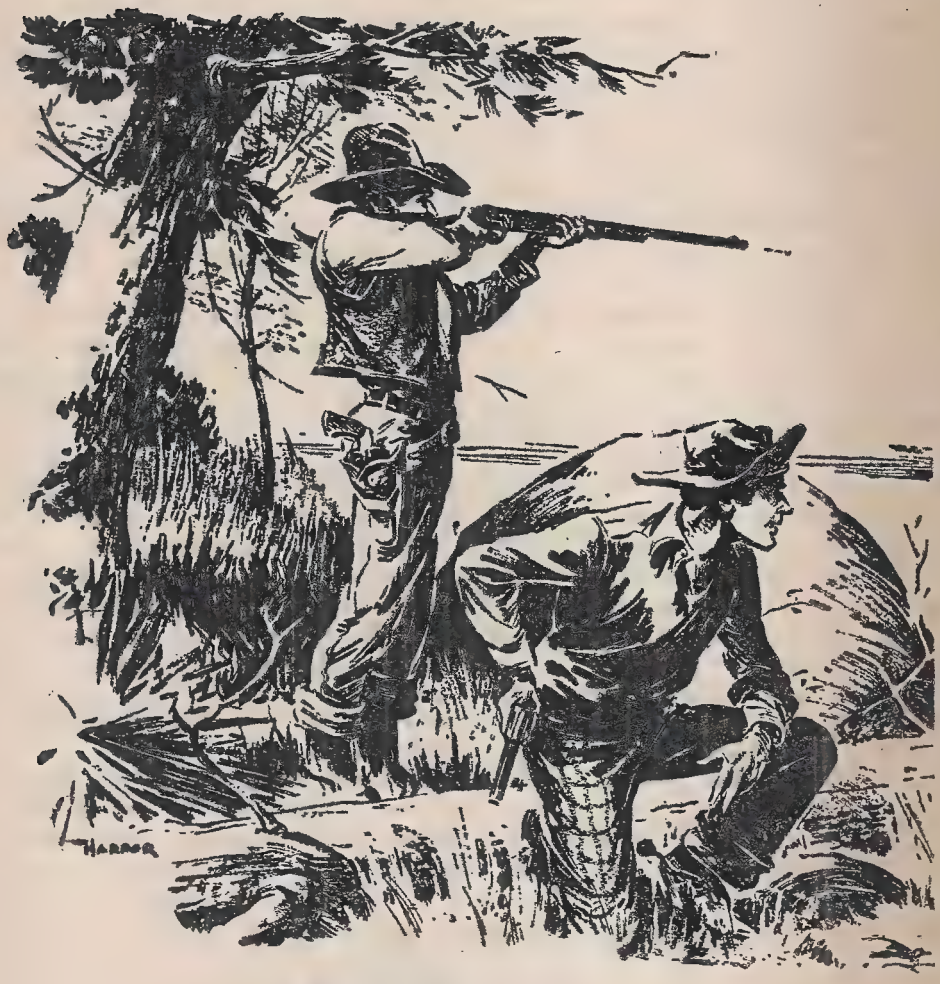
Mayor Findlay grasped his arm. "Those laws will be revoked, Con. That stock of guns and ammunition goes back on sale in your father's store. You can run it and wear a badge at the same time."

Con heard Alice Medford's voice at the door, "Let me through please! I want to see Con Bisbee. Is he all right?"

"Here, Alice!" Con cried, and excited citizens opened a lane for her to rush into his arms. Holding Alice close, Con said, "They're liftin' the ban on guns, I can run the store at a profit and be sheriff, or I can sell it and buy that ranch for Mr. and Mrs. Con Bisbee. Which shall it be?"

Alice glanced at the grinning townsmen and flushed, but her answer came clearly, "I've set my heart on being a cowman's wife, Con."

Cowpoke on a



By D. B. Newton

A PASSING townsman stopped to read the news bulletin that had just been pinned up on the board outside the *Beacon* office. He read it casually, indifferently, and then drifted on along the plank walk; and Joe Welch, seeing that, changed his mind about getting up and going across the dust of the square to look at the board for himself. It could hardly be important.

Not the big news—the only news that would matter to him or to anybody else in that stricken cattle country. Damned strange, he thought for the hundredth time, how a panic in the money marts of the East could wreck a whole pattern of living thousands of miles away. Yet until a break came and the market started up, this paralysis would hold its grip on a cow-poor range. And punchers like Joe Welch would sit and wait in idleness

Pistol Payroll

Although Joe Welch had neither gun, bronc, nor saddle, he hadn't yet become a grubline gent. But when he finally hogtied a job, he didn't know he'd have to borrow bullets and bronc to earn six-gun wages.

Gripping Novelette

on the sun-parched grass of courthouse squares in Burnt Rock and countless other such towns, since there was no one able to give them work.

A whiff of cigarette smoke drifted to Joe on the still, heated air, and he felt the tightening of cheek muscles. His mouth had that dry, cottony feeling a man knows when he needs a smoke bad. One of the other jobless buckaroos sprawled near by obviously had the makings, but Joe Welch kept his eyes resolutely fixed on the brown earth and the busy ants working there. He'd sold his gun and his bronc and his saddle, but he hadn't yet tried the panhandle route. He wouldn't begin by begging tobacco from a stranger—not when the man was likely using up the last of his own supply!

Then a roan horse came singlefooting along the street beside the courthouse lawn, and Joe Welch glanced up into the eyes of its rider—a youngish fellow, good-looking, maybe a little bald under his pushed-back sombrero. He was looking over the men sprawled across the bare patch of earth, his glance speculative; it touched Joe Welch briefly, went over the lean length of him clad in patched and faded jeans, and a shirt worn through at one elbow.

Something inside Joe leaped uncontrollably. Maybe this was a job— But

the questing glance had passed on and it speared the man next to Joe. The rider reined in suddenly. He asked this man, "Looking for work?"

So Joe Welch had been rejected, without a trial! The unfairness of it lifted a half-formed surge of rebellion, until he heard the answer the man beside him gave and the words caught his quick interest.

"You're Howard Mackey, ain't you? Of Cross 8? No, I don't reckon I need a job as bad as all that!"

Joe saw the rider's jaw muscles bunch, his hand jerk the reins slightly so that the white-stockinged roan tossed its head. Mackey said tightly, "I'm offering good wages."

"Gun wages!" retorted the man on the ground. It was he who had the cigarette burning. He took it out of his mouth with blunt, strong fingers and, not shifting his sprawled position, lifted his head for a glance at the rest of the loafers. "Any of you boys ready to commit suicide?"

THERE was a general shaking of heads, and some rolled over to turn their backs on the man in the saddle. The first speaker shrugged, dropped his head back on a cradling elbow. "You shouldn't raise false hopes this way, Mister. You see, we're just honest cow-prods out of work. We got no hanker to carry shootin'-irons in a war against the Stirrup crowd. No, I reckon we'll hold out a little longer."

Another man laughed harshly, added: "Mebbe you've heard Virg Landress and his bunch are in town, Mackey? You'll find 'em over at the Buckhorn. Why don't you sign on somebody like that, if you're so anxious to pay gun wages?"

"Thanks!" retorted the one in the saddle. "Maybe that's just what I will do!" His eyes were ablaze with anger as he jerked his roan about and lifted it to a canter, went away from the sprawl of men in the courthouse yard.

Joe Welch was coming to his feet, on a quick impulse. His hand, swinging down, grazed the shiny place on the right leg of his jeans where a holster once had lain. He understood now why Howard Mackey had passed him up. And though Joe Welch was not by any stretch of the imagination a gunslinger, the grind and growl of his empty belly suddenly made up his mind for him.

To reach the Buckhorn saloon, the young man on the roan would have to ride around two sides of the courthouse. It took less time than that for Joe to cut across the barren square, at a run, and kick up the street's dust as he headed toward the saloon entrance. He ducked under the hitchrail, was waiting there with hat in hand when Howard Mackey drew in and swung down to loop reins over the gnawed pole.

"Mr. Mackey!" he exclaimed, "how about hiring me?"

On the ground, the other was only an inch or two over Joe's average height, and close up that way his blue eyes held a dark cloud of worry. He frowned at Joe, remembering him, and again his glance flickered to the shiny place on the cowpoke's right thigh.

He grunted, "You heard what was said, didn't you? I'm looking for gunfighters. You don't even pack an iron!"

"I had to sell it!" Joe Welch explained quickly. "A man can only get so hungry! If you'd just stake me to cartridges and a rod—"

Howard Mackey was shaking his head, his eyes level and cold. "Sorry, fellow. The kind of man I need would never sell his gun—not even if he starved! And I've made up my mind to do my hiring where I'm sure of what I get." As he said that the Circle 8 owner jerked a thumb significantly toward the swinging doors of the Buckhorn. But his voice was not unkindly when he added, "Good luck to you, though!"

He was gone before Joe could argue, leaving him wordless and with that hollow despair inside of him. Yet somewhere a voice reasoned that he'd have had no business tying into the threatening boundary dispute between Cross 8 and the Stirrup iron, or trying to stack up alongside a salty bunch like the Landress crowd.

WITH a shrug, Joe turned away—and caught sight of the man leaning broad, squat shoulders against a pole support of the sidewalk's wooden arcade.

There was something unpleasant about this man—a mocking sort of smirk that seemed a natural part of his face. As Joe looked the stranger beckoned with the insolent crooking of one thick forefinger; and though he was not used to being summoned with such a gesture, he swallowed his whipped pride and went to this one. The man shoved away from the pole, stood on widespread boots, looming a full head above the other's inconsequential height.

He said genially: "Mackey turned you down for Landress, huh? Just how bad you really want a job?"

"Pretty bad," admitted Joe.

"No gun," observed the other, hazel eyes ticking off the point. "Got a bronc? Saddle?"

Joe shook his head woodenly to each question. How could he expect anyone to hire him, he thought despairingly. Who'd take a man unable to supply any of the equipment essential to cattle work? In this bitter mood he could hardly believe his ears as he heard the man saying:

"Well, I'll hire you, but you can't expect me to pay you much besides your beans. Not if I have to stake you to a rig and a bronc, and run the risk of you lighting a shuck the minute you got 'em between your legs. There's no rich cousin backing my payroll, like our friend Mackey has."

A lump in Joe Welch's throat had to be disposed of before he could answer. He swallowed it down and said, "'S'all right with me, Mister! I ain't afraid of honest work, and three squares a day is pay enough under the circumstances. You don't need to worry about me hightailing with your bronc and saddle, either."

"Well, you look honest." The big man grinned toothily. "Yeah, I think we'll get along. What's your name, fellow? I'm Brag Corson."

Joe Welch had heard of him. Brag Corson, with his half brother Daniel, was co-owner of the Stirrup iron. So, turned down by one side in this range dispute, he had found himself taken on by the other. But Joe Welch didn't consider backing out now, even though he was not particularly taken by this Brag Corson gent.

Brag was saying, "There's an extra Stirrup bronc at the livery barn. Come along while I pay his feed bill and you can throw a tree on him, and that'll fix you up with a mount."

"Yes sir," agreed Joe.

The bronc was a mean-looking bay carrying the Stirrup burn on his stringy left shoulder. He set his teeth against the bit and Joe had to ram a knee into the barrel chest before the bay would open up and let the bridle be slipped on. The saddle, a brush-scarred, single-cinch rig, also was marked with the Corson brand.

So far no mention had been made as to the nature of his new job. As Joe reappeared now leading the saddled bay, Brag Corson only said: "Let's step next door and pack up some grub for you."

The thought of food made the new man's stomach almost turn over, and so did the neat stacks of canned goods along the shelves of the store, with their gaudy and appetizing labels. He waited in silence while his boss ordered coffee, flour, salt, odds and ends of tinned stuffs. And three sacks of Bull Durham! He had all this put on the bill, and called for a gunny sack to load the things into. Joe shouldered it and trailed Brag out again into the smashing sunlight of the late summer day.

"Fasten that grub on behind your saddle," Brag ordered. "When you're ready to ride I'll be at the hotel."

II

JOE WELCH slung the sack in place, lashed it down securely with the saddle straps, and led the bay across the square's thick dust and past the courthouse where the jobless punchers still lolled in the shade. On the steps of the hotel he found Brag busy talking to a thin, stiff-shouldered man who had a harsh look to him, an uncompromising coldness in his steely eye. Joe had had this man pointed out to him before. It

was the elder of the Corson half brothers, and he was listening to Brag's talk and scowling without answer.

As Joe Welch halted respectfully below them at the edge of the walk, waiting, the eyes of Daniel Corson swung to him, ran quickly over his battered clothing. Joe nodded, touched his hatbrim. The tall man only shrugged, lips curling, and turned his glance sourly away without acknowledging the salute. And at this studied insult the hot blood ran up into the new Stirrup rider's neck and face.

Joe guessed that the Corsons were discussing him. For himself, if he didn't much care for Brag Corson he was certain now that he liked the arrogant Daniel even less.

A sudden commotion along the square made him turn then, and he saw men fanning the doors of the Buckhorn, moving out, heading in a group toward broncs racked at the saloon's hitchpole. Howard Mackey fronted them, and as they piled into saddle Joe Welch looked this hardcase outfit over, quickly. Of the lot, Virg Landress himself could be distinguished only in that he looked even meaner, harder, stiffer to deal with than the others. He was a dark, nasty-eyed saddle tough, and he wore his gun handy in a tied down, low-cut holster.

So Mackey had made his deal! He appeared a little grim about it, and when he sighted the two Corsons he reined about without hesitation and rode straight for them. Dust drifted whitely between them as he hauled in and leaned forward across the saddle horn. "All right, you two!" he snapped. "This is fair warning—and you can see for yourselves I'm able to back it up! Stay off Circle 8. Keep your sticky loops off Circle 8 cattle. Don't think any more that just because you're big you can ride roughshod over your neighbors!"

STANDING below the brothers at the edge of the hotel steps, Joe Welch saw Daniel Corson's body stiffen. "This is the worst move you ever made, Mackey!" the older man clipped out tartly. "Taking on a tough crew like the Landress gang means tarring yourself with their brush. And if a single one of that crew of killers steps out of line, the law will hold you responsible!"

"The law!" Mackey, lip curled, jerked a thumb toward the blistered courthouse facade. "You mean that pair of time servers over there, holding down the sheriff's star and judge's bench just because you had power and took care of your friends? Sure, I know damn well which way they'll jump if there's trouble. I know you hold all the aces, with the deck stacked against me. But there'll be no trouble unless Stirrup begins it. And if you do, by hell, I'm ready to help finish it!"

He spurred his bronc around and, leaving that promise behind him, lifted the roan into a quick, dust-spurting gallop. Virg Landress fell in beside him and the rest of Circle 8's new crew of gun toughs strung out behind. As they swept out of town that way, the dust stirring and settling again, Joe Welch thought suddenly that Mackey looked out of place heading that dangerous cavalcade. He looked hardly more than a youngster, and not a little frightened, and—strangely—very much alone. . . .

"That Mackey's a damn fool as well as a liar!" growled Brag Corson "Gun crew or no gun crew, he'll stir up nothing but grief, bucking an outfit the size of Stirrup—spreading all that talk about us crowding him and lifting his cattle. Why, we got plenty of range! Why should we pick on a two-bit, poverty-struck outfit?"

Joe Welch was moved to ask, "You said a cousin or something gave him the money to hire this Landress gang?"

"Yeah. Con Mackey fell into an inheritance and turned it all over to Howard, to fix up his spread with. Instead the fool throws it away paying gun wages, trying to start him a range war."

The new hand gave the thing a lot of thought, riding stirrup to stirrup with the younger Corson brother through the still summer heat. In the confusion of claims and counterclaims it was damned hard to find a straight answer to this mess. Howard Mackey didn't strike Joe as a troublemaker, somehow; while on

the other hand, he found he was revising somewhat his earlier, unfavorable opinion of the Corsons. Brag seemed a reasonable sort of gent, after all, and friendly enough in a crude, coarse way. Maybe surliness and poor manners just ran in the Corson family. Maybe that's all that was wrong with Daniel, too.

He and Brag came at last over a spur of broken hill-country and raised a small, shake-roofed cabin standing below them near a spring, with a pole corral in back and a lean-to saddle shed. This was a line camp belonging to Stirrup and would be Joe's headquarters. Brag Corson, hauling in at the head of the slope, indicated the lay of things with the sweep of a wide, stubby-fingered hand as he proceeded to give the new man his orders.

"TWO-THREE miles southeast," Bragg said, pointing across the rolling land of gray sage and bunch grass and manzanita, "there's a deep ravine that marks the limit of our graze. Stock ain't likely to cross it, and yet a few head do manage to wander over now and again. Your job's to see that any Circle 8 beef coming onto our range is turned back.

"I don't care a damn about our own strays. Let 'em go. But get this straight: Under no circumstances are you to cross that ravine, because if they catch a Stirrup rider on their side the line Circle 8's bound to draw wrong conclusions. All we're after is to show Mackey our intentions are peaceable, and that we'll bend over backwards to lay any grounds for dispute before he can raise them. Is that clear?"

Welch nodded. "Sure. I'll chouse out every Circle 8 critter I can find, Mr. Corson, and push it back onto its own grass. You can count on me to do a thorough job!"

"Fair enough!" Brag seemed pleased. But next moment he had thought of something else and his dark brow frowned a little. He leaned back and opened a saddle pocket, reluctantly brought out a worn, cedar-handled six-shooter.

"You better have this, I reckon," he grunted. "But understand, I don't want you using it on Circle 8—unless, naturally, in self-defense."

"I'll be mighty careful," Joe promised, and he took the gun and thrust it behind the waistband of his jeans. Brag Corson also thumbed extra greased shells from the loops of his belt, which Joe wrapped inside his handkerchief to keep them free of dirt. After another word or two then Brag reined around and headed for Stirrup headquarters.

Joe put his own bronc down the slope, toward the line shack that was to be his lonely base of operations. Suddenly, with a gunny sack full of food waiting behind his cantle, it seemed the gnawing pain of his empty stomach had never been so sharp.

Whatever Daniel Corson's opinion of the range tramp his brother had hired, there couldn't have been a harder worker. The keen pleasure of being needed—and the additional fact that on his shoulders might lie the averting of a range conflict—was enough to keep Joe Welch long hours in saddle through the next few days. Working away from the boundary line, he covered a wide sweep of territory, battling brush and rock. He wore himself down fighting the half-wild beef critters, doing a good job of the chore that had been assigned him.

These sage-stippled hills were full of cattle; though it was coming on toward the season for thinning out the increase and preparing for drives to railhead, with the market at rock bottom there would likely not be much shipping done this year. Yet, as Brag Corson predicted, Joe found there had been little intermingling of stock between Circle 8 and Stirrup, for the dry and grassless ravine made an effective barrier.

That is why, on the third morning, he knew a sudden prodding of alarm at the discovery that some thirty head of Corson beef had moved straight across that rocky boundary, during the night!

Joe reined in and studied that situation, frowning darkly. He didn't need the horse sign to know those cattle were being driven. He'd noticed them yesterday,

spotted on good graze in clear view of the ravine. Someone on the Mackey side must have seen them too, and came across for them with a sticky loop. And not long since; for, sniffing, he found the scent of dust was still sharp in the heat-shimmering air.

Brag Corson had ordered: "Under no circumstances cross the line!" But this was rustling, open and unashamed—and if he moved fast he might catch the thief red-handed. This idea pushed caution from his mind. In another moment Joe had swung his bay, clapped in steel, and sent the bronc straight for the ravine's shallow slant.

ROCKS rattled underfoot, and he came up the other side onto Circle 8 land. He moved warily now, but purposefully; the stolen beef simple to follow and so close their dust hadn't yet settled fully, but hung above the ground in a visible, tawny sheen. As he rode he had the gun Brag Corson had lent him palmed and ready. But the bullet when it came was without any warning, and the breath of it was hot upon Joe's tanned cheek before he heard the lash of the rifle.

He ducked instinctively, the bay curveting under a startled pull of the reins. Then Joe sighted the man sitting saddle near a big sage clump, not over twenty yards from him, rifle at his shoulder and ready for another try. Joe fired hurriedly. He hit trigger twice and through sudden smoke saw the other jerk and spill backwards, the rifle dropping from him with a second bullet never fired.

The other horse started to bolt. Joe Welch spurred forward, leaned and caught the bridle and hauled it up sharply. Then with the bronc following he moved back to where the man lay dead. He swung down stiffly for a look. It was one of the Virg Landress gang of hardcases.

For a long moment Joe stood there, and he knew the cold touch of premonition. There'd be hell to pay now! Because he'd disobeyed plain orders. He had ridden onto Circle 8 range and killed a Mackey rider, and by this unlucky stroke probably started the very war he'd been working to prevent!

No way to cover up—no point in trying to hide the body. Moving woodenly, Joe got the solid weight of the dead man across the saddle of his horse, belly down. He shoved the rifle back into its boot, hung up the stirrups, and looped the reins about the horn. Then he slapped the bronc's rump and watched it trot away with its still burden, knowing it would return to the Circle 8 home ranch. His thoughts were heavy as he got out his tiny, handkerchief-wrapped store of cartridges and replaced the two spent shells in his six-gun.

He had barely finished this, was ramming the gun into place behind his waistband, when a sound behind him brought him around.

At his sudden move the girl gasped and stood there staring, one hand pressed against her throat where its tan showed above the rolled-back collar of her blouse. How she had come in on him Joe didn't know, but there she was—a small, trim figure in divided riding skirt, dark curls tucked up under a wide-brimmed hat, her blue eyes wide with horror. One hand held the trailing reins of her black pony. She was unarmed.

Joe Welch exclaimed harshly, "How long you been watching me?"

"I heard the shots," she said, and her voice was tight and sounding as though her throat must be very dry. "They led me here and I found you leaning over his body. I saw you put him on his horse. I saw you punch the empties out of your gun—" Her startled eyes went to the brand on the shoulder of Joe's horse. "Stirrup! On Circle 8 range, killing one of my cousin's men!"

Something came clear to Joe Welch then. He blurted, "You're Howard Mackey's cousin—the one that lent him money to hire that crew of gunslammers?"

"I'm Constance Mackey," she agreed coldly. "And for the first time I see the reason for Howard doing as he did. Fight fire with fire, and Stirrup killers with their own medicine!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Joe felt the blood rush angrily into his face. "I'm no

killer, understand? I plugged that Landress gunwolf, but it was in self-defense after he had taken one shot at me and was ready for another. And I wouldn't be on this side of the line except I was after stolen Stirrup beef!"

"That's a lie!" she cried, eyes flashing. "Circle 8 never touched another brand's steer!"

A hot retort died on Joe's lips, unspoken. There was sincerity in Con Mackey's words, and he suddenly came to a decision. "Mount up, miss!" he said grimly, "and I'll show you proof! If you see that stolen cattle for yourself, will you believe me?"

"I suppose," she admitted slowly, "I'd have to! But—"

Joe Welch was already moving toward his own bay, locating stirrup, stepping up into leather. "It won't take but a few minutes of your time. They're likely just over that rise ahead!"

III

STILL frowning, but with some of her certainty shaken, she fell in beside him and they went up that slope, the trail of the steers clearly marked. But when they topped the ridge they saw a thing that made them both haul rein and sit like that a moment, staring.

Con Mackey breathed: "I—I can't believe this!"

A wide, dry basin had opened before them, fed by brush-choked ravines leading down from the broken hills. And out of these ravines the red shapes of cattle were flowing, in groups and bunches, to join a dust-raising mill of beef already gathering on the flats below. They could see the riders chousing those steers down toward the herd; could hear their shouts and the slap of ropes against cowhides, the lowing of the beasts. Several hundred head were already in the gather, held there by three of the mounted men. The work was going forward smoothly.

The girl said, "Those are Circle 8 riders, but I'm sure they had no orders to make a gather. Howard said this very morning he would wait, give the market a chance—"

"Don't you see?" muttered Joe Welch grimly. "Landress and his crowd have gone on their own, and they can sweep this range clean with one take. All they have to do is run their herd into the lava beds and loose every trace of it!" He pointed far out, to a black tumble of broken land showing in the distance. "Why work for honest pay, when they can have everything?"

"I've been afraid of them from the first!" The girl's voice sounded choked, horror-stricken. "This morning the lot of them disappeared, and when Howard refused to grow suspicious I saddled up to take a look for myself at what was happening on the range." She turned on Joe suddenly. "I've got to get back! Quickly!"

"Why?" Joe Welch's tone was short and a little brutal. "They're all the crew your cousin has. What can Howard Mackey do alone?"

This stopped her a moment. She gasped: "But there—there must be something!' She swung about, indicating the far-off, sun-shimmering stretch of badlands. "There's a gap yonder through which they'll have to run the cattle. Even two guns might hold them there."

Joe shook his head. "I've got one gun and a half-dozen extra shells! And we'd never reach Circle 8 in time. We've only a single chance!"

"And that's—"

"The Corsons! It's not too far to Stirrup headquarters. Just maybe we could bring back help from there before it's too late to stop Landress!"

She turned a hopeless, scornful glance on him. "Do you think that cold fish, Daniel Corson, would turn a hand? No! It would tickle him silly to know Howard's own riders had turned on him, that they stood a good chance to ruin Circle 8 for all time!"

"You forget," Joe pointed out quietly. "There's Stirrup cattle in that gather too, probably a sizable number. The Corsons should savvy it's to their own in-

terests to forget their differences, this once."

But he knew she didn't believe it, and Joe didn't believe it much himself.

Still, it was much better to be doing something! He pushed his bronc hard, grimly determined the Corsons should have a chance to prove what kind of neighbors they could be. The frightened girl keeping close pace beside him, their broncs ate up the tawny miles; and when he sighted the Stirrup line cabin Joe suddenly pulled up and Con Mackey did likewise.

"Someone's there!" He pointed out the sorrel standing slack-hipped before the cabin's open door, tail swishing the flies. "Looks like Brag's horse." Without quite knowing why, he added: "You wait here a minute. I'll go down. If that's one of the Corsons, we may be saved a ride!"

JOE went on alone, dropping down the brush-choked slope toward the silent cabin. Yes, it was Brag's sorrel all right. And now Brag himself edged out into the sunlight and stood there, legs planted wide apart, thumbs hooked in gunbelt. He grinned crookedly as Joe rode into the clearing.

"Howdy," he greeted. "I been sort of waiting for you."

"And I'm looking for you!" cried Joe Welch, hauling rein. "Listen, Brag—"

The other cut him off. "Step inside," he grunted. "Let's git out of this sun!"

Impatience prodded the cowpoke as he swung down, leaving reins dragging, and followed Corson across the sill. It was dark in here. At the last moment some instinct made Joe lurch quickly sideward; he glimpsed Brag's distorted face and Joe's hand was already groping for the barrel of Corson's gun as it went off. Joe felt the heat of gunflame, its blast a terrific punishment for the ears in these cramped quarters. But he had deflected the muzzle just enough and the bullet that should have drilled his guts missed him cleanly.

Then the smoking weapon was wrenched from Brag's fingers and Joe's right fist scorched as it smashed full into the other's face, driving him backward to crash full into a chair and go down.

"All right, you murderous skunk!" Fury blazed inside the cowpoke. "Get up and I'll strip the hide off you!"

Outside a bronc came tearing through the brush. Joe heard Con Mackey's terrified voice calling as she plowed to a halt, and he sang out: "It's O.K., Miss Mackey! I almost walked into a trap, but it didn't quite spring on me."

Then he was moving forward, kicking the splintered chair out of the way. Twisting his fingers into the front of Brag's shirt, he hauled the man bodily to his feet. Despite his size Joe dragged him across the floor, clear out into the sunlight, and there he slammed him up against the side of the shack and covered the big man with his own six-shooter. There was blood on Brag's face, from a mashed nose. As in a daze he stared at Joe and his eyes had hatred in them.

Con Mackey, still in saddle, looked at both men in horror. "I don't understand!" she cried. "You mean Brag Corson tried to kill you?"

"For the first time," Joe answered, "I'm beginning to make sense out of this whole deal." His eyes burnt into the prisoner. "I was bait, wasn't I? A nobody you picked up and put in this danger spot just in hopes one of Mackey's gunhands would plug me and give an excuse for you to move in with your own gun crew and with your crooked law! And since that didn't happen, you were going to kill me yourself—only I managed to keep you from it.

"I never liked your looks, in the first place." Bitterness touched his voice. "I should have guessed there was something phony about this job, but I needed one so bad I didn't bother to think it through. And you put on a damn good act, about Stirrup wanting nothing but peace with its neighbors. You played me for a perfect sucker!"

Brag Corson had got back some of his self-assurance, but he didn't like the gun muzzle centered on his soft belly. He scowled, using one sleeve to wipe blood from his face, and muttered a little thinly: "What you think you're gonna do now—plug me?"

Rage made Joe Welch's finger tremble on the trigger, and it wouldn't have been hard to finish Brag the way he would have shot a mad dog. But he didn't. His eyes suddenly touched the filled shellbelt draping Corson's broad hips, and turning his head he caught the gleam of a rifle butt thrust into a saddle boot on Brag's horse. His face hardened then on a grim and dangerous decision.

"You're coming with me!" he snapped. To the girl he added, "Miss Mackey, you burn leather for Stirrup headquarters, just as we were aiming to, and find Daniel Corson. Tell him about that stolen herd. Make him come with his crew!"

"He won't!" she cried bitterly. "We know that now! We've found out what the Corsons are!"

"I know it's a gamble," Joe admitted. "But still, you've got to try. And I can't give you much time."

"But what are you planning?"

"I got two six-guns and a rifle now, and plenty of shells. I'm going to head for that gap and try to stop Virge Landress. Maybe, if you hurry and have luck talking sense into Daniel, I can even hold out until you're able to bring help. And friend Brag," he added tightly, "is riding with me to lend a hand!"

BRAG CORSON had tried to kill him once and might again if he saw a chance. But Joe had helped himself to the man's gun and belt and the rifle was in his own saddle boot. He kept one eye on Brag as their broncs pounded straight across country on the shortest, quickest route. In the ticklish fight he was headed for, any kind of help—even a treacherous snake like Corson siding him—might tip the scales.

The big man, unspeaking, bloody face sullen, used his steel and sage-stippled ground streaked grayly under flashing hoofs. Joe squinted ahead as the rugged, bleak-looking badlands began to show. He began to see what a hopeless proposition it would be if Landress and his gang could get their stolen cattle into that lava country. His only chance of holding them lay at a place where hills pinched in steeply, at the very rim of the malpais.

The two were under a steep ridge now, their flagging broncs running neck and neck, and below them billowing dust marked the movement of the herd. All at once it was a race to determine which would reach the gap first.

Joe leaned and shouted at Brag, "You hold me up now and I'll kill you!" He meant that, literally and coldly. He added, "There's Stirrup beef mixed in with the rest! Doesn't that make any difference to you?" Brag showed no sign of hearing.

Suddenly they were in a scatter of scrub trees. With these for a shield Joe Welch pulled gradually to a course that quartered through them, downslope, down toward the narrow of the gap. And then the place was below them and they had seconds to spare. He hauled in, leaped down dragging rifle free as he shouted at Brag:

"Hit the dirt and move ahead of me!"

Scrambling through gravel and ripping catclaw thorns, they slid the last few yards on braced bootheels. Then the brush stripped away and they were out on the bare face of granite rock. The rumble of the coming herd was loud and very near. Joe fancied he heard a shout as one of the rustlers sighted him. After that he dropped full length behind a screening boulder and poked his rifle barrel into position.

Through swirling dust he caught a glimpse of a rider. At once he brought it into his sights and his finger tripped the trigger. When powdersmoke swept away, the horse was pounding on into the confusion and its saddle was empty.

Immediately a bullet struck the rock and he ducked instinctively as it whined away toward the high dust-haze. Beside him Brag Corson gave a curse and hit the ground, burrowing for protection, and Joe Welch grunted:

"Now I reckon you'll fight! From here on it's your neck if you don't!"

A second slug splatted from the rocks. Brag Corson, green with fear, flung out a hand toward Joe. "Damn you!" he howled. "At least—give me a gun!"

Joe flipped Brag's weapon out of holster and slid it across to him. He grinned tightly as he saw the man grasp it in eager fingers, seeming to find new courage in the feel of its metal grip.

"Poor distance for a six-gun," Joe Welch yelled above the mounting thunder of the cattle. "But we can knock down the lead steers and maybe that will keep those killers at a distance. It's a matter of holding them off just as long as possible."

They tried it. The terrified bellow of the herd engulfed the racket of their guns. Then there was a crescendo of confusion and a blinding rise of dust as the rear of the herd came pressing in to a blind crush that was blocked by the bodies of their fellows. The dust became so thick the pair on the spur above could no longer penetrate it, and had to give over firing into the blinding swirl.

Brag Corson sank back, coughing. "Damn it," he cried. "My gun's empty!"

"Toss it over." Joe caught it out of the air and began thumbing shells from his confiscated belt, to replace the empties in both six-shooters. But he did not return Brag's gun immediately. He didn't trust the big man farther than he would Virg Landress. He didn't want Brag armed except when there was a need for it.

IV

BELOW, the herd was quieting at last, the mill ended, the steers at the rear of the press easing up their efforts to move ahead. As the dust began to thin Joe Welch peered for signs of the rustlers; he could find no glimpse of them, and that bothered him. The moments dragged out. Then a sudden rifle shot lanced the stillness, a steel-jacketed shell gouted the earth not inches from Joe's side.

He swiveled quickly and a cold sweat sprung out all over him as he saw. On the hill opposite, across the gap, one rifleman had been sent up and he was behind a windfall, in position high enough for the boulders behind which Joe Welch and Brag were crouched to give them no protection from him at all. Joe tried a shot that did no good. He whirled on Brag Corson then, sweeping a gesture upslope.

"Get back!" he cried. "We got to git back into the timber."

Corson took a look at the open slope, eyes bugged with terror. "We'd never make it!" he babbled. "They'd plug us on the run!"

"They'll plug us here if we stay!"

With a groan Brag Corson lurched up and began lumbering up the steep slant, and Joe went after him. As they clambered over barren rock, more bullets screeched and stamped the earth about them; yet somehow, unexplainably, they made the shelter of scrub pine growth and here Brag threw himself face down. "I ain't goin' another yard!" he whimpered. He was cursing from the sting of a rock splinter that had scratched his dark cheek. Joe Welch shrugged, hunkered into the protection of a fallen trunk.

Dead silence had settled, broken only by the small, nervous sounds of the standing cattle and the rattle of brush in such breeze as there was. He saw no movement, no glimpse of the men they were fighting, as time dragged slowly by. And he didn't like this.

Since their broncs had scattered, retreat was out of the question. On the other hand, Virg Landress would have to get rid of this pair before he could move ahead with his stolen beef, so there was bound to be a showdown. When it came Joe had little hope that he and Brag would be able to stand up long against it; and meanwhile, every second that passed only shoved that moment off a little longer.

Maybe ten minutes later a sudden screech from Brag brought Joe to his feet. Here came the whole Landress crew, charging straight at them along the slope of the hill! They stood in their stirrups, weapons blazing fire through the scattered trees as their broncs fought for footing. And as the first bullet came across and *thunked* into a pine bole near Joe Welch's head, he was twisting about, tossing one of the six-shoot-

ers to Brag Corson who caught it in eager, fumbling hands.

After that Joe had his rifle at shoulder and was triggering, fast. The foremost rider took a slug squarely and went spinning out of saddle, his bronc racing on through the trees with stirrups flying. Joe missed the second one. Then his rifle was empty and he hurled it away, swept the other six-gun from his holster.

Brag's gun was rattling, and he got in at least one good hit. But there were too many of the others and now they struck with force to sweep that pair clean off the face of the slope. Joe had a wild glimpse of Landress, face twisted with hatred. Then something stung him in the leg, nearly sent him sprawling. He braced himself, smoking weapon lifted.

THEN other guns were speaking suddenly—rifles—they came from above, from the head of this timbered slope. Unbelieving, Joe Welch knew what it meant. Stirrup! He saw saddles emptied under the blast of that sweeping fire. Then Virg Landress was right on top of him, foam streaking from the distended nostrils of the black he forked, six-gun swinging down at Joe Welch.

Joe's shot came over an instant before the outlaw's. Through blended gun roar the black plunged into Welch, a thrust of the sweaty shoulder driving him off his feet heavily. A body landed on top of him, fell limply away at the thrust of Joe's arm. It was Landress, and he rolled over and lay on his back in the rocks, eyes wide, the lower half of his face shot to nothing.

The charge had broken, the remaining outlaws scattering; and, bent on finishing the job, other men on Stirrup-branded horses were rocketing by, buck-jumping after the fugitives through the scraggly stand of trees. Joe got to his knees, smoking gun dragging down his hand. He was like that, staring dazedly after the last of the raiders, when near at hand a gun spoke.

Something struck him a terrific blow from behind. He dropped forward, but even as he fell he was thinking: *Brag Corson!* Joe rolled, saw the treacherous Corson, and the look in Brag's face above the smoking gun. Brag would have fired again, to finish him, only somehow Joe managed to bring his six-shooter up and, aiming almost by instinct, squeezed trigger. Brag went down. And Joe Welch sank back into dizziness and pain. . . .

Then Con Mackey reached him, and at the touch of her hands he got his eyes open and managed a sick kind of smile. Daniel Corson was there, too. He said, "We'll get the kid to a doctor at once. I don't think he's hit bad—"

Lying there on the ground, Joe twisted his head for a look at Daniel. "I'm sorry, boss. I—I guess I killed your brother."

"My half brother," Daniel reminded him. There was no grief in the cold, gray-tinged face. "He had it coming! He tried hard to make trouble between me and Circle 8. I guess he was tired playing second fiddle around Stirrup and figured to use me to run the Mackeys out so he could take over their place for himself

"When he pointed you out to me in town as a man he wanted put on the payroll, I assumed you were some crook friend of his. Afraid I wasn't even civil to you, that day, as a consequence. I'm sorry, Joe."

" 'S'all right," said Joe Welch, and he saw friendliness light the face of the Stirrup owner. Nothing wrong with this gent, he knew suddenly. Daniel would make a good boss—and a good neighbor!

He looked at the girl, and her eyes were shining. "There's big news, Joe! A Stirrup rider saw it on the *Beacon* bulletin board less than hour ago. The panic's ended—the market has started up again!"

"So you see," added Daniel Corson, "there's going to be plenty work for everyone now—with barely time to get a roundup started and a shipment on the rails before winter. I'd like you to stay on with me; or the Mackeys would hire you, or of course you could find a job on some other range if you'd rather."

"I reckon I'll stick around." Grinning at Con Mackey's pretty face, Joe figured no other range held half the attractions to be found right here.

.45 Merrymaker

By Giff Cheshire

Because of a gal, Russ Tims agreed to make sweet music at his enemy's shindig. But when Russ learned of the bushwhack payment in store for him, that cowboy fiddler at least figured on calling his own pistol tune.

WHEN Russ Tims swung down in front of the Flatrock hotel, holding his sacked guitar by the neck, he was aware of curious stares from half a dozen directions. He racked his horse, then entered the hotel, where he laid the musical instrument on the battered pineboard desk.

"Will you keep your eye on this till I want it, Curly?" he asked the desk clerk.

"Sure, Russ." The kinky haired clerk grinned self-consciously. "Everybody's sure glad you're going to play for the dance, Russ. Wouldn't seem right without Russ Tims and his geetar and monkeyshines, everybody says. They moved the piano over from the Yellow Wheel, and Pop Thale's downtown with his fiddle, but it'd sure be flat without you."

"Why shouldn't I play?" Russ asked, unable to keep a tinge of harshness out of his deep voice.

The clerk flushed. "Why, no reason at all, Russ, except everybody knows how you feel about Luke Upson. I'm sure glad to see you've come around."

Russ nodded and walked out, thinking he never would come around about Luke Upson, galled again in remembering how the railroad promoter had cornered him, making it impossible for him to refuse to play for the farewell dance Upson was throwing for the little schoolteacher. The corners of Russ's mouth tucked down in a moment's bitterness. Russ Tims, minstrel, clown, ne'er-do-well. He was essential to this dance, but only to see that folks had a good time.

Pop Thale tramped down the boardwalk, his battered fiddle case under a bony arm. He was scowling as he greeted Russ. "Boy, I don't like it. You're the only cuss in Smoky Valley who didn't fall into Luke Upson's pocket. How come he talked you into playing?"

Russ scowled. "He was with the teacher when he asked me, and he caught me in front of some people in Miller's store. He asked me purty-please, since the teacher's going away. If I'd of refused, I'd of been a sorehead. So I had to say I'd come."

The oldster's voice lowered to a confidential tone. "You just watch yourself, boy. I ain't been too sure you ain't right about that slick jigger. He's gonna build us a railroad. He's promised us everything short of heaven, and I gotta feeling he'd of throwed that in if we'd asked."

"He can afford it," Russ said savagely. "He's already sold fifty-one thousand dollars worth of stock in Smoky Valley. In a spur railroad that's nothing but a lot of maps and figures. We sure need a railroad, but I don't figure he can build one outta paper."

"Well, you watch it," Pop said, and went on.

RUSS turned into Ferd Snell's barbershop to get his tawny hair trimmed and his lean, angular face scraped. He sat in the chair in nettled tension. The barber started to glow about the shindig at the hotel but stopped when he got no more from Russ than a grunt.

Russ kept trying to remind himself that he had nothing against Luke Upson but his vague, mysterious sense of warning. When the promoter had shown up in Flatrock he had seemed like an answer to a prayer, an answer that Russ Tims felt was a little too perfect. Isolated Smoky Valley was in desperate need of a spur railroad on which to bring in feed and supplies and to ship out beef. Its inhabitants were being denied a prosperity that adequate transportation would have given them. Russ Tims needed and wanted a railroad as bad as anybody.

Luke Upson had been basing on Flatrock for two months now. He had a man called Tysdale with him, introducing the cold-faced fellow as his railroad engineer. Wallace Tysdale carried all kinds of drawings and tabulations, which he discussed in a gravelly voice and in a way that nobody in Smoky Valley really understood. The spur would be thirty-one miles long, connecting Flatrock and the valley with the main line at Kynesburg, following a cleverly engineered route through the Rino Hills. Tysdale talked abstractly of gradients and curvatures, and everybody nodded and pretended their appreciation.

Upson confined his own talk to finances. His idea was to form a company in Smoky Valley so as to be independent of big railroad interests and what he called "absentee capital." He asked the

valley to subscribe fifty-one per cent of the stock, which would give it the controlling interest, while he proposed to put up the remaining forty-nine himself. That way they would be his boss, he pointed out. The initial capital proposed was an even hundred thousand. While the valley's part had been easily raised, Russ could not believe that Upson would actually throw his own share into such a pot.

Luke Upson was a smooth customer, Russ acknowledged, a genius in mass domination. Though handsome, expensively tailored and urbane, he had made himself one with the valley. He understood its problems. He visited around, drinking its corn whisky and helping with its chores. He had attended its parties, weddings, and funerals; already a couple of babies had been named for him.

When the company was formed they made him president, treasurer, and general manager, with dignified titles for half a dozen local figures. Those who were not flattered were pleased by the prospects and unwilling to question so good a proposition.

Now that school had let out, Luke Upson was throwing this farewell dance for Zoe Sargent, the teacher, who was going away on the morrow. Upson and Tysdale were also leaving for a few weeks, to start the ball rolling, as they claimed. It was an open secret in the valley that Upson's engagement to Zoe Sargent would be announced. You could get three-to-one odds that they would be married before the departure of tomorrow's stage.

A knife twisted in Russ Tims as he reviewed this. He hadn't had the inside track with the teacher, but every swain in Smoky Valley had been left behind in the dust when Luke Upson came to town. Nobody blamed Zoe Sargent, for there wasn't a woman in the valley who failed to experience a flutter in her heart when she bathed in Luke Upson's warm, admiring gaze. His courtly devotion to the little teacher was a pretty thing to watch, everybody said.

BARBERED, Russ slid out of the chair, paid for the service, and left the shop. The afternoon's brightness was failing from the sky. There was a tangible excitement in the streets for, knowing Luke Upson's genial, generous hand, the town knew his shindig would be a humdinger. Men were buying new shirts and levis, and women had long since cleaned out the local supply of hair ribbon and talcum powder. Even the youngsters were scurrying about in bright-eyed excitement.

Prowling the streets, Russ questioned himself closely as to why he felt as he did about the railroad proposal. It was not jealousy, though that was what the valley had ascribed his criticism to, refusing to listen to his questions. It was not simple dislike of Upson's winning ways. The man carried an impressive array of credentials. It had been a long time before even Russ had begun to realize that they might be faked.

It was something else that first set Russ to wondering. Once, at a country dance, he had accidentally discovered that Wallace Tysdale carried a six-gun under his bulky left armpit. Luke Upson likewise carried a small derringer. Now that the railroads were civilizing the West, men rarely carried arms unless there was special need. Certainly a genuine engineer would not carry a sneak weapon, which somehow bore a strange kinship to the cold glitter in Tysdale's eyes. A smooth, genial sort like Upson, who made countless friends and practically no enemies, would certainly have no natural need for a derringer.

Russ rounded a corner and grew aware of Zoe Sargent, standing on the edge of the sidewalk and gazing off across the street. She did not turn her head as he moved up behind her. On sudden impulse he said, mimicking Luke Upson's warm, bombastic voice:

"Take a long look, little lady! Tomorrow we leave this hick town for good!"

She whirled. "Luke! Why, it's you, Russ!" Zoe laughed in genuine appreciation of his prank. "You sure fooled me, Russ. Everybody says you should have been an actor."

Russ regarded her with calm eyes. "I'm just a cowpoke, ma'am," he said, reverting to his natural voice and drawl.

Zoe's friendly gaze searched his face. "Russ, why did you say that about leaving town forever? Why're you still so certain Luke Upson's a confidence man? He's done everything in the world to prove his sincerity and genuine friendliness."

"Call it just a joke, Zoe." Russ smiled at her, seeing in swift insight that a girl whose simple presence made people happy and anxious to do things for her would develop a deep natural trust in the goodness of the world. Zoe Sargent was like that, friendly and generous with understanding and sympathy, so that her pupils' worship had spread to include their parents, as well as the valley's unmarried men. He did not want her to receive her first disillusionment from the likes of Luke Upson, and this hard wish put a pinch to his mouth.

"It's nice of you to play for my party," Zoe said. Mention of the affair that was being held in her honor put a glow in her eyes, a woman's natural enjoyment of a tribute.

Words would never be enough to make her wary, and, thinking of this, Russ nodded as she left with a smile. He turned upstreet for half a block. He paused just within the batwings of the Yellow Wheel. Wallace Tysdale sat in one of the two games underway. A blocky, bald man with a rocky face, he spent a great deal of his time here, though he was careful to balance his winnings and losses judicially. Dislike rose in Russ, and he turned outside again.

He hesitated once more. Luke Upson came out of the hotel and headed down the street, not noticing Russ. He turned into the barbershop, spoke briefly with the barber, who was working on a customer, then headed on toward the baths in back.

The idea hit Russ Tims, then, a daring plan that would show Upson and Tysdale in their true colors if it worked, that would make Russ Tims the laughing stock of the valley if it failed. He waited by the Yellow Wheel for several minutes, nodding now and then to a passerby and consuming a cigarette, then started across the street.

FERD SNELL, the barber, nodded in mild curiosity when Russ came in for the second time within the hour. "Upson here?" Russ asked softly.

"Taking a bath. Getting ready for the dance. I always fix water for him this time of day."

"I've got to see him a minute."

"Sure. Go on back."

There was a partition in the rear of the barbershop, walling off a larger room separated into half a dozen stalls, each containing a wooden bathtub. There was a cast-off kitchen range with a fire in it, heating two old wash boilers of water. Dripped water showed that a tub had just been filled. All the doors were open save one, and Russ crossed to it.

"Luke?" he called, using Wallace Tysdale's choppy, gravelly voice.

"Yeah. What is it?" The splashing of water ceased for an instant.

"Thought I'd better tell you Russ Tims's in town. Wearing a gun. Mebbe he intends to play at the dance, but I'm guessing he's gonna make trouble."

"Come on in, Wally." Sounds from beyond the door indicated that bathing operations had been resumed. Upson's suspicions had not been aroused.

"I gotta go, Luke. Thought I'd ought to tell you. What'll we do?"

"Like we figured. He's going to be plenty roweled when I announce that Zoe and I are to be married in the morning. We'll work on it. He won't like seeing me paw her. He'll make a play, and you'll get him. It'll be to protect me, so the town'll be on our side. It'll make this sorehead talk of his sound all the more like spitework, until we're well away from here."

"I'm for blowing now, Luke. Why take a chance on him upsetting things?"

"Because I want the girl and she wants the party and to be married before we go. She's trusting but not dumb. That's why. Otherwise we'd've faded out

of here a week ago. I've told you that before. I'm going over to her boarding house for supper, so I won't see you before the dance. You just keep an eye on Tims."

"Sure, Luke." Russ turned away and went out through the front room, his blood racing in him. Russ Tims, the clown, with his guitar and singing, his imitations of the daffy sheepherder, the heartbroken barfly, the talking horse, whose mimicry of local figures was so sharp and harmless that even they looked startled and amused at the same time. Russ Tims, whose time was so agreeably in demand that he never seemed to have enough left to work his own little spread properly, so that when he had really fallen for a girl he had nothing to offer her. Russ Tims was getting some good out of his talents, at last.

Prowling up the street, Russ remembered Pop Thale's worry and warning. So Upson had really had a definite scheme in mind when he invited Russ Tims to entertain at the dance. Russ was not surprised at confirming that the rascally pair meant to skip with fifty-one thousand dollars of the valley's money. Nor that they did not want to leave a man behind who would quickly raise an alarm when time passed without their returning to start their paper railroad. They wanted to leave the valley trusting and complaisant so they would have plenty of time to make a complete getaway.

Russ looked up Pop Thale, who was mellowing for the night's fiddling in a little sidestreet saloon. "I fooled Upson into tipping his hand," he told the oldster, explaining it. "Remember how I kicked when they elected him to all the key offices in the company, giving him a free hand with the finances? How he argued he'd have to go outside and negotiate with contractors and equipment firms and had to have quick cash and a free hand to deal with them? The way this country swallowed that it deserves to be trimmed."

Pop Thale looked thoughtful and took a sip of beer. "When it comes to second guessing, you're right, son. But the way Upson works, I dunno. He gets everybody to feeling good and slips his tricky stuff in so easy it takes smarter folks than us to smell a trap. Whatcha gonna do about it?"

"You got a gun at home? Your place's a lot closer than mine."

"Yeah, but—"

"Get it for me. Before the dance starts. Keep it in your fiddle case."

IT WAS the supper hour, but as Russ tramped by the Yellow Wheel he noticed that Wallace Tysdale was still in the card game. This relieved him somewhat, for he had worried about the man's seeing Luke Upson and the pair's learning the straight of the little conversation in the barbershop.

Russ went to the hotel to eat his own supper. When Pop Thale got back and the piano player came over from the Yellow Wheel, they began to warm up. When the supper trade had been served, the hotel help cleared the dining room, and the merrymakers began to arrive for the dance.

Russ's nerves were tight as the strings on Pop's fiddle, for he had much to accomplish yet this night. By nine o'clock the dance was under way, the big room crowded and spilling out into the lobby. Russ noticed that Wallace Tysdale had been torn away from his card game, at last. Luke Upson made a late and impressive arrival with Zoe Sargent.

Russ's heart turned over at seeing the little teacher in her prettiest gown, eyes shining and happy as she waltzed with Upson, then with the others who cut in so fast that she could take no more than a dozen steps with anyone. The trio of musicians in the corner opposite the big double door was well practiced together and the spirited frontier music was good.

At intervals, between dances, Russ put on one of his regular acts. He lampooned Pop Thale and his fiddle, with an imaginary instrument and jug of corn whisky, taking a long pull and fiddling merrily only to run down and

require reinvigorating. He sang with some numbers, clowning with his guitar. He imitated some of the more apparent human sponges working on the free whisky generously provided by Luke Upson and drew a laugh even from them. But his heart was not in it.

By eleven o'clock it had turned into a regular shakedown, and Russ called an intermission. For a long while he had been keeping a close watch on Wallace Tysdale, and had seen no close communication between him and Upson. Tysdale totally lacked Upson's social charm, keeping strictly to himself, facing the crowd, back always toward a wall. Moving through the crowd, Russ checked Upson's position in the lobby, then slipped into the narrow space behind Tysdale and whispered, with Luke Upson's inflection:

"Don't look at me, Wally, but listen. We've got to clear out fast. Get horses and the money and have them out back. If Russ Tims makes a play cover the crowd for our getaway. I'll explain it later. Understand?"

There was a slight nod of Tysdale's head. Russ moved swiftly away with a hammering heart.

When the dance resumed, ten minutes later, Russ still had not regained calm. There was about an even chance that his imitations had roused some element of suspicion in one or the other of the men he was pitted against. If so, they would be building a trap of their own. Yet Russ's talent for mimicry was inborn and genuine. The pair would have to be extraordinarily alert to expect it to be used against them. Either way, the chips were down.

Russ's tension eased a little when he saw Tysdale drift away, presently. He was gone for nearly an hour. When he returned his blocky face was cold and thoughtful. He kept trying to catch Upson's eye, but the promoter was deep in the convivialities.

RUSS rose presently to put on the big act of his life, making certain first that Pop Thale's six-gun was loose in the open fiddle case beside his chair. He rose, bent and palsied, stroking an imaginary beard, blinking eyes staring off into the distance. Then a piping voice began: "Where's that railroad? Been sittin' here for thutty years waiting for that air train! You reckon somethin' went wrong with our president and manager and treasurer, boys? Reckon the redskins got him? Dang me, if he ain't back in another thutty years, I'm gonna start worryin' about him!"

A hush had gone over the crowd like a wave. Eyes, shocked and embarrassed, riveted on Russ. In the center of the floor Luke Upson turned with Zoe Sargent to stare. Near the double doors Tysdale was not looking at Russ but was trying to catch Upson's eye again.

It took all of Russ's control to concentrate on his mimicry. He began again, "Anyhow, we got us some awful purty paper, boys. Mighty purty. But dang me, I kinda hankered for a real railroad, back there when I was a boy. I been thinkin' mebbe we should hung onto our money until we had the beginnings of something as looked like one. I been thinkin' mebbe we should of made our president use his own part of the money to let the contract and order the equipment. Danged if I don't wish I'd thought of that thutty years ago." Russ sat down, shaking his head feebly and in deep regret.

It took with the crowd, as visual demonstration usually did, Russ knew. The listeners had been amazed and rocked by his daring. Hundreds of questioning eyes pinned on Luke Upson, probably seeking no more than a denial of Russ's deadly implication. His own eyes narrowed with hate, Upson lifted a hand.

Wallace Tysdale took it for a signal. His hand moved into his coat and came out with the gun. His cold eyes spat fury and contempt at the crowd as he gripped it. "Stand back!" he growled. "Shove clear back against the walls if you don't want to get hurt!"

Tysdale clearly expected co-operation from Upson, but Upson stood frozen, dismay and panic on his handsome features. The promoter tried to speak, to restore the semblance of sanity to this, but Tysdale rasped:

"Get a wiggle on, damn you, Upson! We ain't got all night!"

Upson broke then, bewildered and frantic, racing toward the doors. Russ Tims' quietly searching hand had come out of Pop Thale's fiddle case, gripping a Colt .45. The crowd had obeyed Tysdale's crisp instructions and cleared a wide avenue between the two armed men, staring at each other in deadly concentration. There was a look of bafflement on Tysdale's heavy face, as though he suspected betrayal. But it was too late. He fired savagely at Russ, backing.

To make his case stick beyond refuting, Russ had been compelled to wait until he had been shot at. He heard the whistle of hot lead, then brought Pop's .45 into play. His first shot dropped Tysdale, then Luke Upson was clawing out his derringer. Russ stepped toward him calmly, and the two guns roared together. The reverberation and strain dizzied Russ. He swayed a little as he watched the promoter go down.

THE dance broke up after that, or rather it turned into a sobered meeting of the new railroad company. If Tysdale's berserk action had not been enough, the case against the confidence men would have been clinched when somebody found the two saddle horses in the alley, with the valley's money stuffed in a pair of saddlebags.

Now, as the shock began to wear off, Pop Thale climbed up onto a chair, hammering the top of the piano to attract attention.

"Folks, we've got the company and we've got a lot of the money raised. I see no danged reason why we shouldn't have us that railroad. We got anyhow one smart man. I move we elect him into the vacancies caused by the sad fate of our old friend Luke Upson. I gotta feeling that if we do, we'll get us a railroad built, somehow."

A roar of applause, without one dissenting note, made it official.

Russ was pleased by the action, but something kept him from dwelling on it. Zoe Sargent had gone running from the room, after the shoot-out. He knew that the shock to her had been far greater than to the valley. The little teacher had learned that the world was far less trustworthy than her friends. He was glad she had found it out in time, but that did not lessen the poignancy of her hurt.

So Russ made a point of being on hand when the stage left the next morning. To his surprise, Zoe Sargent did not take it. Worried about her, he walked to her boarding house. She received him in the parlor, grave and demure.

"I—I got to wondering when you didn't take the stage," Russ said awkwardly.

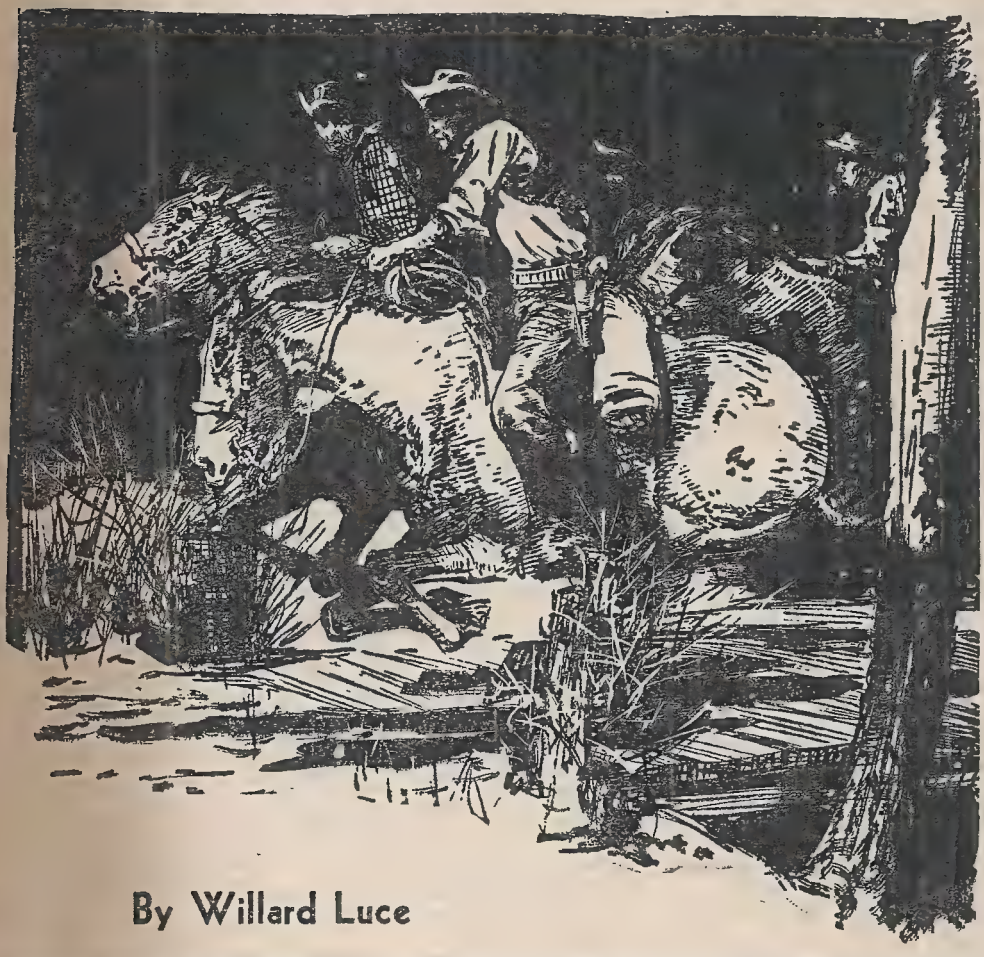
Zoe smiled gravely. "I don't have any place to go, really. My best friends are here now. My real friends. I want to keep teaching here, if they'll have me."

"Why, I reckon there's no doubt about that, ma'am."

"Russ!" She smiled then, for the first time. "Please don't say ma'am to me. Before I—I got touched in the head, I liked you awfully well, Russ, but you were so shy and backward. I appreciate that now, Russ. When you play a part it's for fun. The rest of the time you claim to be nothing but a cowpoke. And one honest cowpoke's worth a hundred glittering fakes. Understand me, Russ?"

"I reckon I do, ma'am," Russ said softly. Russ Tims' entertaining was going to take a back seat in the future. He had a railroad to build and a spread to build to prosperity. And there would be no play-acting to it when he turned at last to courting.

Four Horsemen from Hades



By Willard Luce

Night watchman Ryle Partridge slipped up on his job when the construction company's payroll was looted. And, to save himself and his suspect son, the oldster rode a hell-bound trail to tie the guilt on gold-mad marauders.

RYLE PARTRIDGE sat bolt upright. For a long moment the little man felt a slow panic while he couldn't remember where he was or what sound had awakened him. He heard the sound of hoofs on the roadway above him and after that water running over the spillway, then he knew where he was. The panic inside him mushroomed and he became nauseated with the thoughts of failure.

Night watchman Ryle Partridge had been asleep on the job and the sound that had awakened him had been the sound of gunshots.

Frantically he clawed his way to his

feet, brushing away the dirt and the pine needles from his wrinkled clothes. He reached the road and stopped only long enough to check his gun, then he went toward the dam and the construction offices beyond with the stiff-legged run of an old man.

He reached the dam and had to slow down, his old muscles refusing to keep up the pace. Now he could see lights on in the construction company's office, and he knew his fears had been right. Slowly he moved across the dam and up the slight hill, dreading what was to come, but knowing he had to face it. His hand shook a little as he fumbled at the doorknob; then the door opened and he went inside, squinting his faded blue eyes against the light.

The three men in the room all turned toward him as one, and all started yelling unintelligible accusations at him. Partridge didn't have to hear the words to know what they meant. In one corner the safe stood open, its drawers and papers scattered over the floor.

Guy Atkins, the engineer, had his high-tops unlaced, sleep still crowding his eyes. Ed Dalquist and Sidney Yager, straw bosses, were fully dressed and didn't look as though they had been to bed.

PRESENTLY a fourth voice cut in. It was a heavy, booming voice, hard with authority. "Come on in here, Partridge." This was Wild Bill Henry's voice. Wild Bill Henry, toughest construction boss in the Unitas. Ryle Partridge licked at the dryness on his lips and turned that way. In his sixty-two years he had taken a lot of bawling-outs; he reckoned he could stand another one.

He was a big man, Wild Bill Henry was. His huge shoulders pushed at the seams of his checkered shirt, opened at the collar and rolled up at the sleeves. His high-top, lace boots and riding pants gave him an appearance of height that went with his bulk. Henry's broad heavy face was covered with fist-scars both old and new; for Wild Bill ran the toughest construction crew in the mountains with his fists, asking no odds and giving none.

But tonight Wild Bill Henry seemed tired. He sank into his chair before Partridge's eyes, sighing heavily.

In the silence that followed, Partridge shifted his hundred and twenty pounds uneasily from one foot to the other, wondering why Wild Bill didn't go ahead and get the damn thing over with.

Then Henry pushed a neckerchief across the desk. "I ain't makin' no accusations, Partridge; but you can see how it is."

Partridge reached slowly for the piece of cloth. It was unnecessary motion, for he already knew, and the knowledge was like ice in his stomach. Slowly his lips formed one word which came through them with a half-choking, half-sobbing sound.

"Brad!"

Wild Bill Henry nodded. "We all know he's been wild enough, but I never expected this, Ryle." Then as though he had unwillingly shown a hidden weakness, Wild Bill Henry's voice became hard and driving once more. "For all I know you might have been in on it, too, Ryle. At least you weren't up here where you should have been, and you didn't make one damn effort to stop them. If it hadn't been for Dalquist and Yager we might not have discovered it until morning. They caught them coming out of the office and Dalquist says he winged one of them.

"Now get this straight, Partridge, I don't intend to lose that payroll. Those men out there have worked and by hell they'll get their money. The sheriff won't be able to get up here until tonight sometime; so either you get that money back by then, Partridge, or I'll see both you and Brad behind bars for the rest of your lives."

There was no softness in Wild Bill Henry now, and Ryle Partridge knew the construction boss meant exactly what he said. "But I haven't any authority off the dam, Bill, none—"

"You've got a forty-five. That's all the authority any man needs. And don't try to run out on me, Partridge. I'll foll[illegible] you to hell and back if you do."

THE three men were still in the outer office when Ryle Partridge came out —Guy Atkins, Ed Dalquist, and Sidney Yager. Maybe it was the tight-lipped look Partridge gave them, maybe it was the hard glint in the old man's eyes—whatever it was, they made no comment when he came out. They asked no questions.

Partridge went through the door and outside, his thoughts on Brad Partridge, his only son. As Henry had said, Brad had been a wild one—nothing serious, just full of molasses and vinegar and feeling his oats. He had had a few fights, lost some money at poker, raised a little general hell. But there had never been anything like robbery before.

Slowly Ryle Partridge crossed the road and went down the hill to his own shack. Without conscious thought he pushed some grub and extra shells into his saddlebags. In the same automatic way he threw a saddle on his gray gelding and made a last trip back into the shack for the bags and his old .45-90 rifle.

It grew lighter as Partridge followed the road's rapid descent from the dam to the valley floor. Once there he pulled up and climbed stiffly out of the saddle to study the four sets of horses' hoofprints showing clearly in the dust. Four.

Thoughtfully Partridge went over Brad's running mates. With somewhat of a shock he realized his son's closest friends were the three Moran brothers from Mountain Home. The Four Horsemen they called themselves and were nigh onto inseparable.

It had been the four of them who had cleaned out the Elkhorn Saloon when they had caught a dealer cheating at blackjack. It had been the four of them —always the four of them—who had shot up the town of Duchesne, gun-whipping three of the town's hardcases, and kissing the preacher's daughter.

Ryle Partridge's faint smile was choked with memory, for he, too, had been young once; and unlike most old men, Ryle hadn't forgotten his younger days when his veins had been filled with fire instead of high blood pressure.

Once more Partridge climbed onto the gray. The outlaws had made no attempt to hide their tracks. He followed them easily for another five miles, until one set took off to the right. This came to Partridge with the same staggering chill as had the sight of Brad's neckerchief, and it was only with an effort that he forced himself to follow the single set of tracks to where they topped a rise a half mile off the road. From here he could look down onto Brad Partridge's little homestead with the lone dun riding mare in the corral.

It had been on that same homestead that Ryle Partridge had made a failure at ranching while Martha, his wife, had been alive. Now he had made a failure as a night watchman and a failure at raising his and Martha's only child. These thoughts rankled bitterly in the old man's mind.

For ten, maybe twenty, maybe thirty minutes he sat his horse there on the ridge, stoop-shouldered. Then quite suddenly he straightened in his saddle and became as a new man, for he had made his decision; and with that decision had come a plan of a sort which Partridge would follow come hell or high water. For Ryle Partridge was like that—slow to think a thing through, slow to make up his mind, but once it was made up it was harder to change than a homebound mule's.

He whirled the gray, his actions sharp and meaningful now. His decision had been simple enough. Where he could possibly consider Brad Partridge taking part in the robbery, he could not consider his son being a damn fool. Only a damn fool would lose his neckerchief and leave a trail straight to his own dooryard. Brad Partridge was nobody's damn fool.

RYLE came back to the road and went down it at a fast clip now. The road went on and the tracks followed, twisting and turning until they at last reached the little town of Mountain Home. The three sets of tracks turned off at the Moran home, went beneath the heavy gate and on to the corral where three saddle horses looked over the top rail. No more recent tracks led out again.

Partridge sat staring down at the tracks. Slowly he shook his head like a stubborn old woman unwilling to believe her own eyes. Muttering to himself, he swung to the ground and pushed open the front gate.

As he stepped into the front yard, the door opened and Jerry Moran stepped onto the porch, a .30 caliber Krag held over his arm. Young Moran pulled back the hammer of the gun and swung it toward Ryle Partridge's middle.

"You got a hell of a nerve coming here after last night." His voice held an edge of anger.

Doggedly Ryle Partridge went up the weed-hedged walk. He wasn't such a fool as to think Jerry Moran wasn't dangerous. The kid was. It showed in the tenseness around his eyes and mouth. It showed in the quick, nervous way he handled the Krag. It showed in a hundred ways that Ryle ignored. He had to have his talk with the Morans now. He had come too far and the thing had become too twisted for him just to sit down and think it out in his own slow way.

Partridge took the two steps onto the porch and leaned against the rail, wiping the sweat from his wrinkled face with a blue bandanna. His fingers made a scraping sound over the stubble of gray whiskers.

He said, "Hot, isn't it, Jerry?"

Jerry Moran took another step backward, uncertain suspicion moving along his youthful features. "You better get going, Partridge, before Vern finds you here and shoots your guts out for what you did to Drake last night. We'd have gone back last night and done it if Brad hadn't talked us out of it. Brad ain't here today."

Jerry and Vern and Drake Moran and Brad Partridge. There they were again, the four of them—the four horsemen.

Ryle Partridge licked at the dryness on his lips. He spilled tobacco when he tried to shake it into a paper. Then he shook his head in that same dogged, stubborn way. Only one thing could have made Jerry so wild.

He said, "I didn't shoot Drake last night."

He looked up and saw the wild light flame in Jerry Moran's eyes, and for a long moment he thought the kid was going to shoot. Then he saw Jerry's mouth moving and he knew the kid was trying to talk. When Jerry did get the words out, they stumbled over each other, wild and only half coherent.

"So you didn't shoot Drake last night, huh? Then how did you know he was shot? How did you know that? You got to do some damn quick thinking to pull you out of that slip. Only us Morans and Brad knew he was shot. If you didn't shoot him, how the hell did you know he was shot? Answer me that one if you can." Jerry Moran's lips jerked spasmodically and the wild light was still in his dark eyes.

Ryle Partridge slowly lit his cigarette, feeling a tinge of fear at how close to death he actually was. One wrong word would set the kid off like a giant cap. "There was shooting last night at the dam, Jerry, when the payroll was robbed. Brad's neckerchief was found in the office. I trailed Brad home and I trailed you here, but I didn't have anything to do with the shooting."

Jerry Moran's lips twisted. "A likely story, Partridge. A likely excuse, but it won't buy you any hay. You ain't never liked us Morans 'cause you thought we weren't good enough for Brad. But hell you can't shoot us down one at a time. You can't. You can't—" Moran's voice rose to a scream.

Partridge didn't move. He knew this half-crazy kid was going to shoot, but he didn't move. And he knew what kind of a hole that Krag would tear through his shriveled body, but he didn't move.

IT WOULD have done no good. Jerry Moran was as hair-triggered as a hysterical woman and would have shot him before he could have moved a foot. He had to disregard most of what Jerry had said as insane mutterings, but he couldn't disregard the Krag. Any movement, any—

The screen door suddenly flew open, the edge of it catching Jerry Moran across the side of the face, knocking

him off balance, spoiling his aim. The Krag roared. Partridge felt the wind of the bullet's flight and had a sudden thankfulness that he was still alive.

Then Vern Moran was on the porch. He caught the Krag with his left hand and slapped his kid brother across the face with his right. It wasn't a single slap but so many they sounded like the staccato of a man punching the light bag, the one side of Jerry's face receiving the palm, the other, the back of Vern Moran's hand. When he stopped, Ryle could see the red welts covering Jerry's face. Blood made its slow trickle from his nose to the edge of his mouth.

Then Jerry Moran opened his mouth and his words still came out high-pitched and hysterical, and Vern Moran started again his mechanical hand-whipping. Ryle closed his eyes and turned his head to shut out the sight, but he couldn't shut out the sound; and when his stomach retched he wished to hell Vern Moran would stop it.

Finally he did and Partridge heard Jerry's body-shaking sob. "I always said you were too damn trigger-hungry, Jerry. Now get out of the way until you learn some sense."

By the sounds that followed, Partridge knew Vern had shoved his brother back into a corner of the porch where the kid sat down heavily to sob out his misery. He loked up and Vern Moran was before him; taller, bigger, older than his two brothers, he was the more staple of the three and in many ways the more dangerous.

He said, "All right, Partridge, let's have it."

Again the night watchman went over what had happened. When he finished, Moran was silent for a moment; then he asked, "And you think we did it?"

But Ryle Partridge shook his head. "Only a damn fool would have left those tracks if he were guilty. But when the sheriff follows those tracks and finds Drake with a bullet hole in him, you're going to have one hell of a time proving you're not." When he caught Vern's light-eyed nod, he added, "You don't mind if I ask a few questions?"

NOW . . .

The TRUTH about MARRIAGE RELATIONS IS FRANKLY DISCUSSED

AT LAST an eminent doctor tells all the long obscured facts, in frank, easy-to-understand language! No longer any need for ignorant guessing about the magnificent instinct that is your birthright. No more prudish evasions, no more veiled generalities in these 576 pages of TRUTHFUL, straightforward FACTS!

Everything you should know is openly discussed. Be a master of Love's complexities! Learn how to win and hold love! Don't rely on half-truths.

DON'T BE A SLAVE TO IGNORANCE AND FEAR

Education is the key to a perfect love-filled life. Ignorance and misinformation lead to fear, worry, disease and shame. End ignorance TODAY! Learn how to overcome physical mismating. Endow yourself with the lifetime of marital happiness that should be yours!

PARTIAL TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Honeymoon—Can Virility Be Regained?—Mismating—Love Starvation—Frigidity in a Wife—Promiscuity—Venereal Diseases—Perfect Mating—Holding Your Husband—A Lover's Privileges—Pregnancy—Intimate Feminine Hygiene—Essential of Happy Marriage—Planned Conception—Why Men Leave Home.

SEND NO MONEY!

To show our faith in this amazing book, we offer it to you on trial. Send no money—just fill out the coupon below. When it arrives, in plain wrapper, pay the postman $2.98 plus postage. Keep book ten days—if not completely satisfied send it back and we will refund your money immediately without question. "Eugenics and Sex Harmony" will not be sold to minors.

STATE AGE WHEN ORDERING

576 Pages—Over 100 Graphic Illustrations

Pioneer Publications, Inc.
1790 Broadway
New York City

SEND NO MONEY — MAIL COUPON TODAY

Amazing New Book Included FREE of Extra Charge

The Ogino-Knaus Method of rhythmic Birth Control with table of "safe" and "fertile" periods, explained in Dr. Clinton's new book included FREE with each purchase of EUGENICS AND SEX HARMONY

PIONEER PUBLICATIONS, INC.
1790 Broadway, Dept. 535,
New York 19, N. Y.

Please send me "Eugenics and Sex Harmony" in plain wrapper. If I am not completely satisfied I can return the book and the entire purchase price will be refunded immediately. Also send me free of charge your book on "New Birth Control Facts."

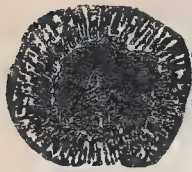
☐ Send C. O. D. plus postage.
☐ I enclose $2.98, ship postpaid.

Name _____

Address _____

City and State _____ Age

Orders from Foreign Countries 18 Shillings in Advance



BELIEVE IN LUCK? - $

Carry a pair of GENUINE BRAHMA RED LIVE HIGHLY MAGNETIC LODESTONES! Legend reputes, Occult Oriental ancients superstitiously carried two Live Lodestones as MOST POWERFUL MAGNETIC "LUCKY" CHARMS, one to "attract" Good Luck in Money, Games, Love, Business, Work, etc., the other to "prevent" Bad Luck, Losses, Evil, Trouble, Harm, etc. Believe in Luck? Carry a pair of these curious Genuine Brahma Red Live Lodestones! We make no supernatural claims $1.97 postpaid for the two, with all information. $1.97 and 27c extra if C.O.D. Satisfaction GUARANTEED or Money Returned. Order yours NOW!

ASTROL CO., Dept. R-10, Main P.O.
Box 72, BROOKLYN, N. Y.

NOTICE! Beware of imitation! We absolutely GUARANTEE these Genuine Brahma Lodestones are ALIVE! We believe they are just what you want, the REAL THING—POWERFUL, DRAWING. EXTRA HIGHLY MAGNETIC! Fully Guaranteed—Order TODAY! Copyright 1937—A. Co.

SONGWRITERS

win $100

$100 CASH EVERY MONTH for best song placed with us. Hollywood composers write melody WITHOUT CHARGE. Lead sheets and records furnished. Send song material TODAY for FREE EXAMINATION. You may win $100. Write for details.

CINEMA SONG CO. Dept. R-22 BOX 670 • BEVERLY HILLS, CALIF.

Game & Club Supplies

Transparent Beveled and Weights; Transparent Flats; Tops and Bottoms; Door Pops; Hit and Miss Combinations; Luminous Glasses and Readers; Shiners; Daub; Bicycle and Bee Readers. Rush FREE Catalog request.

FREE Catalog

"The Old Reliable"

D. SMYTHE CO.

BOX 8 NEWARK, MO.

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years. Benj. J. Bogue, Dept. 5627, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

GET THIS FREE BOOK!

DO YOU WANT TO STOP TOBACCO?

Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men. Caution: Use only as directed.

30 Years in Business

FREE BOOK

THE NEWELL COMPANY
135 Clayton, Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

LINCOLN AND INDIAN HEAD

PENNIES WANTED

WILL PAY $10.00 EACH FOR CERTAIN Lincoln Pennies!

Indian Head Cents $50.00; Nickels $500.00; Dimes $1,000.00 All rare coins, bills, stamps wanted! Send 10c for illustrated Catalogue and other information.

FEDERAL COIN EXCHANGE, 3-AFM, Columbus 5, Ohio

PILES

Let us tell you of a mild, painless, low cost home treatment perfected by Dr. O. A. Johnson, for 28 years head physician of one of America's Finest Rectal Clinics where thousands of cases have been successfully treated. Write today for *Free Trial Offer.* No obligation. Address JOHNSON RECTAL CLINIC, Desk 982, Kansas City, Mo.

Moran shook his head.

"What were you doing up to the dam last night? There's no towns above the lake, only mountains."

"We were looking for cattle, Partridge." Moran's voice had a strange driving power to it. The longer he talked the more angry his words sounded. "Check your records and you'll find the construction company ain't bought enough cattle from the ranchers in this valley to put in a pig's eye. Yet they serve beef, every damn meal they serve it, and you never see them driving any in. You know what that means, Partridge. Either they're stealing it or some of their men are, and that's just the same damn thing.

"We've missed cattle before, and yesterday there were twenty-five head gone from our south pasture. We followed the tracks and found the cattle in a little canyon just above the lake. Only five of them had already been butchered and their hides still hung on the fence. We found tracks of two men all over the place.

"At first we figured we'd go down and have it out, then we decided it would be better to get the sheriff. But first we figured on following the wagon tracks to see where they led. We did, Partridge, and they led right to the dam.

"Then, just as we started to pass the office, someone let go from inside with a .45 and damn near knocked Drake out of the saddle. We let go with a couple shots and got the hell out of there, not knowing what it was we had run into. We didn't know until this morning when you told us."

MORAN stopped for the space of a minute, then went on. What he said was straightforward and without apology.

"You're a company man since you took that night-watching job, Partridge. Anything we say about the company we also say about you. You are just as responsible as any man there. And even if you are Brad's father you want to be damn good and careful how you talk, because this thing ain't settled yet, not by a damn

sight. We didn't rob the payroll and we won't be jailed for it, not by you or by Sheriff Olsen, or by anybody else. Just remember that, Partridge."

Ryle nodded, his mind still pondering at the things he had just learned. He hadn't lived sixty-two years for nothing; he could tell when a man was telling the truth, and Vern Moran was.

A half an hour later Partridge was again in the saddle, back-tracking himself to the dam. From the Morans he had learned enough to be pretty damn sure the payroll was still at the lake. Whether the frame-up against Brad and the Moran boys had been deliberately planned from the first, he couldn't tell. And he wasn't certain that the cattle stealing and the robbery had any connection, but he was very much inclined to believe they had.

He remembered the four men who had been in the office that morning: Guy Atkins, the engineer; Ed Dalquist who was boss of the bull gang; Sidney Yager who bossed the cement crew; and Wild Bill Henry, the bull of the woods. He took each man and mulled him over in his mind, taking his character to pieces as a scientist might dissect a grasshopper.

As the gray picked its way along the twisting road, Ryle Partridge came to realize how little he actually knew of the men with whom he worked.

He reached the damn just after dark, tired and weary to the bone. Forty miles was a long ride for his old body, and it cried out its protests in every muscle and every joint as he made his way toward the light construction company office. He pushed open the door and closed it again to lean against it while his eyes made their adjustments to the light.

His lips made a faint, tired smile as he saw who was in the room. They were all there, every one of them—Guy Atkins, Ed Dalquist, Sidney Yager, and Wild Bill Henry. And there was one other whom Ryle was right happy to see, Sheriff Karl Olsen.

"Well, Partridge?" It was Wild Bill Henry who spoke first.

Slowly Partridge came away from the

For Men Who are Trained in

AUTO BODY & FENDER WORK

Men 18 to 60. Want a future with good pay, perhaps a business of your own later? If you are mechanically inclined, start now to learn to become an auto body mechanic and fender repair man. This fast growing field has great possibilities for trained men with experience. U.E.I. spare time, home-study training combined with actual shop practice gives you sound, basic knowledge of latest, best methods so you may get the experience which may bring you big pay. Capable instructors supervise your studies and actual practice. Course includes acetylene welding, spray painting, use of hand and power tools, etc.

THOROUGH, RELIABLE TRAINING

U. E. I. has trained men for new opportunity fields since 1927 and many students are now making good. Auto body and fender repairing is one of the best profit-makers in any garage or service station. Little capital required. . . . placement service, or we will show you how to start your own shop. Get the facts FREE, without obligation. Write today.

Training approved under G. I. Bill

UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
AUTO-CRAFTS DIVISION
1314 Belden Avenue, Dept. X-4W, Chicago 14, Ill.

Gentlemen: — YES! I want to get into profitable Auto Body and Fender Repair Work. Please send me FREE FACTS at once.

*Name*_____ *Age*_____

*Address*_____

*City*_____ *Zone or County*_____ *State*_____

If veteran of World War II check here ☐
☐ Check here for Special Information if under 17.

DETECTIVES

TRAINING—SECRET INVESTIGATIONS—FINGERPRINTS
Easy Method—Short Time.
Home—Travel—Secret Code-Booklet FREE—WRITE.
INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
1701-Z MONROE ST., N.E., WASHINGTON, D. C. 18

Fit-Rite makes False Teeth TIGHT

Makes loose dental plates fit snugly and comfortably.
LASTS for MONTHS!

Simply squeeze on dental plate and put it in your mouth. Hardens and becomes part of plate. Money-back guarantee.
FREE Generous package of Dental Plate Cleanser with each order. Send $1.00 or mailed parcel post collect.
Fit-Rite Co., 1573 Milwaukee Ave. Dept. 3-92, Chicago, Ill.

SONG POEMS WANTED

TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Free Examination. Send Your Poems To
J. CHAS. McNEIL
A. B. MASTER OF MUSIC
510-B So. Alexandria Los Angeles 5, Calif.

FUN WITH AMAZING NEW MAGIC DICE

Here's a special pair of fun dice that can do anything you want them to. It's amazingly easy to predict numbers, perform amusing tricks. No one can guess the hidden "secret" unless you tell them! Display amazing "control" yet the real reason is cleverly concealed from everyone. Fun and fascination! Easy directions explain details. Perform many "magic" tricks! Price only $2.98. Get a pair today. Send no money. Just name and address. On arrival, pay postman only $2.98 plus postage. Money back if not delighted. Address Hollister-White Co., Dept. 482-D, 215 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

REFRIGERATION and AIR CONDITIONING

REFRIGERATION TRAINING Since 1927

MECHANICAL units everywhere need servicing. Soon new units will require installation service. You can be ready with reliable pay-knowledge of this big income field. Unique home study-plus actual practice plan prepares you to enter servicing or installing field or get into business of your own. Great opportunities now and later. Get the facts FREE. No obligation. Write today.

Training approved under G. I. Bill

UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
1314 W. Belden Av., Dept. H-18, Chicago 14, Ill.

POEMS WANTED

For Musical Setting

Mother, Home, Love, Sacred, Patriotic, Comic or any subject. Don't Delay—Send us your Original Poem at once—for immediate consideration and FREE Rhyming Dictionary.

RICHARD BROTHERS
53 WOODS BUILDING — CHICAGO 1, ILL.

RAISE TURKEYS THE NEW WAY!
Write for free information explaining how to make up to $3000.00 in your own back yard. Address: **NATIONAL TURKEY INSTITUTE, Dept. 273, Columbus, Kansas**

GAME SUPPLIES

Flats — tops — loads — caps — card readers — inks — daubs. Game Boxes and Books.

Write for free catalog.

O. C. NOVELTY COMPANY
Dept. 4-AF 1311 West Main Street
OKLAHOMA CITY 4, OKLAHOMA

ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS

Sell our ILLUSTRATED COMIC BOOKLETS and other NOVELTIES. Each booklet size 4½x2¾. We will send 25 assorted booklets prepaid upon receipt of $1.00 or 75 assorted booklets sent prepaid upon receipt of $2.00. Wholesale novelty price list sent with order only. No orders sent C.O.D. Send Cash or Money-order.

REPSAC SALES CO.
1 West 13th St., Dept. 405, New York 11, N. Y.

BE A DETECTIVE

Make Secret Investigations

Earn Big money. Work home or travel. Fascinating work. Experience Unnecessary. **DETECTIVE** Particulars FREE. Write to **GEO. T. A. WAGNER,** 125 W. 86th St. N. Y.

DO YOU WANT MONEY-LOVE-LUCK!

LOADSTONES Have been carried since Egyptain times to gain MONEY-LOVE-LUCK. *Always* carried in pairs in your pocket or purse. According to legend one is to draw and attract GOOD LUCK in Money, Love, Games, etc. The other is to drive away the things that keep you from getting what you desire. No supernatural claims made. Sold only as curios. Our genuine Loadstones are Highly Magnetic. You will like them. Guaranteed or your money back.

SPECIAL 2 Genuine Live ***Highly Magnetic Loadstones,*** the ancient legend of Loadstones and a special carrying bag. All for $1.98 postpaid. (C.O.D. $2.22). Order yours today on a Money-back Guarantee.

OLIVER COMPANY, 3119-F Troost, Kansas City 3, Mo.

door and moved to the center of the room, to stop and search each face with a sharp, critical look. He was in no hurry now. What he had to do, he had to do just right.

He asked, "Who does the construction company buy its beef from, Henry?"

The silence was electrifying and startling in its completeness until Wild Bill reared up and bellowed like a Brahma bull on the prod. "Of all the asinine questions—"

Then Partridge's voice cut into his, as sharp and as strong in its own way as was Wild Bill Henry's. "Answer that question, Henry, and I'll tell you who robbed your payroll." He let the silence run on, then added significantly, "Unless maybe you're afraid." He hoped this last would prod Wild Bill into an answer, for Ryle was guessing. He didn't know enough for an argument. He couldn't afford one. "Last night two men brought five butchered beef into camp. I want to know who they were."

IT WASN'T Wild Bill who answered. It was big, arrogant Ed Dalquist, boss of the bull gang. "What you trying to tell us, Partridge, that they brought the beef in and then used the wagon for a getaway after robbing the safe?" Dalquist couldn't keep the sneer off his lips or out of his voice. His booming laugh rolled against the sides of the room.

Partridge insisted, "Who were those two men, Bill?"

"If you don't know who they were, how do you know they were here at all?" This came from Sidney Yager, cement crew boss.

With this Partridge turned to face Dalquist and Yager, remembering these two had claimed the honor of catching the robbers coming out of the office. And Ed Dalquist even claimed to have winged one of them. A faint smile pulled at the corners of Ryle Partridge's mouth, for each word the straw bosses had uttered had added a little to his knowledge, had cemented together the parts as mortar cements two bricks.

Deliberately Ryle placed his hand over the .45 at his hip. The hand shook a lit-

tle and he licked at his dry lips before he spoke again.

"I do know who they were, Yager," he lied calmly. "I saw them. I just want Wild Bill's verification."

That was what did it. Partridge saw Wild Bill Henry's eyes swing toward the two bosses in such a way that he knew they were the ones. He saw Dalquist and Yager look at each other.

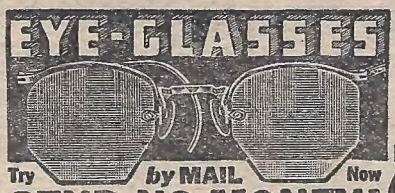
He dragged at his .45 just as Ed Dalquist swung out his arm, knocking the lamp off the desk. But Partridge didn't shoot. Where Dalquist's action was as good as a confession to him, it would play hell standing up in court. And in the darkness there was too much chance of hitting someone else.

He moved backward until his back came against the door, and he stopped there, waiting and listening to the sounds. That tight dryness came back to his mouth and he licked his lips. His old, tired legs became weak and he had to push at the door to keep from sitting down.

Then it came. At first just the quick, soft footsteps of a rapidly moving man. Then the shoulders that crashed into his stomach like a battering ram. The air *whooshed* out of his lungs with a sudden, horrible sound. Somehow he brought the .45 down with all the weight of his shriveled body. It landed with a solid, gratifying sound against bone, then he brought it down again and still again before the man against him slid to the floor.

With the man's weight gone from in front of him, Partridge's legs wouldn't hold him up. He fell on top of the man at his feet, his lungs screaming out for air.

Then he felt cold air on his back and felt the door pushing against his leg as someone tried to pull it open from the inside. Partridge raised the gun again. This time he swung it in a horizontal plane, feeling its sharp impact against a shinbone and hearing a scream of pain. Before he could swing again he heard a quick, hard shuffle above him, then Wild Bill Henry called out:

EYE-GLASSES

NEW LOW PRICES
Newest Styles!
Try by MAIL Now
SEND NO MONEY!
(TEST YOUR OWN SIGHT AT HOME WITH OUR NEW PATENTED SIGHT TESTERS.
16 DAYS Trial Offer
MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE of SATISFACTION
If you're not 100% satisfied with glasses we make we'll refund every cent you pay us. Repairs: 48 Hr. Service!
Write TODAY for FREE catalog, scientific test chart.
U.S. EYE-GLASSES CO., 1557 Milwaukee Ave., Dept. 5-92, Chicago, Ill.

SONGWRITERS
POEMS WANTED AT ONCE
Send Your Poems, Any Subject, for Immediate Examination and FREE BOOK:—
"YOUR FUTURE IN SONGWRITING"
RADIO CITY MUSIC ACADEMY
1674 Broadway - - - - New York 19, N. Y.

BECOME AN EXPERT
ACCOUNTANT
Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $2,000 to $10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays." G. I. APPROVED.
LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.
A Correspondence Institution. Dept. 549-H, Chicago 5, Ill.

6 Selected DRESSES $3.99
A dress for every day within your means. Assorted Styles, Colors and Prints. USED but CLEANED. Some may need repairs. Sizes 12 to 18 only.
Send $1.00 deposit, balance C.O.D. plus postage. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED or purchase price refunded promptly. FREE CATALOG.
OUR BETTER DRESSES (used) 4 FOR $3.90
Sizes 12 to 20 and 38 to 44
COTTON DRESSES (used)....5 for $2.95 Sizes 12 to 20
OUR BETTER GRADE.....3 for $2.55
COLUMBIA MAIL ORDER CO.
548 GRAND STREET 120M NEW YORK 2, N. Y.

SONG POEMS WANTED
TO BE SET TO MUSIC
Publishers need new songs. Submit one or more of your best poems for immediate consideration. Any subject. Send poem.
PHONOGRAPH RECORDS MADE
FIVE STAR MUSIC MASTERS. 650 Beacon Bldg., Boston 8, Mass.

BUY and KEEP
U. S.
SAVINGS BONDS

do you WORRY?

ABOUT RUPTURE

Why worry and suffer any longer if we can help you? Try a Brooks Patented Air Cushion. This marvelous appliance for most forms of reducible rupture is GUARANTEED to bring YOU heavenly comfort and security—day and night—at work and play—or it costs you NOTHING. Thousands happy. Light, neat-fitting. No hard pads or springs. For men, women, and children. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial** to prove it. Not sold in stores. Beware of imitations. Write for Free Book on Rupture, no-risk trial order plan, and proof of results. All Correspondence Confidential.

BROOKS COMPANY, 301-D STATE ST., MARSHALL, MICH.

SONGWRITERS

We are interested in all types of song poems and lyrics. Send us yours for FREE examination. If accepted Motion Picture Songwriter will collaborate with you. FIFTEEN YEARS' EXPERIENCE. Write to Paramount Song-Recording Studio, Dept. T-20, Box 190, Hollywood, Cal.

USED Correspondence Courses Complete HOME-STUDY Courses and self-instruction textbooks, slightly used. Rented, sold, exchanged. All subjects. Satisfaction guaranteed. Cash paid for used courses. Full details and 100-page illustrated bargain catalog FREE. Write NELSON CO., 1159 N. Wabash Ave., Dept. 13, Chicago 5, Ill.

CHARM PERFUME

An enchanting perfume of irresistible allure, clinging for hours with ineffable, fascinating fragrance. Just a tiny drop is enough. Full size bottle 98c prepaid, or $1.32 C.O.D. Directions free. One bottle FREE if two are ordered.

ROLLDEX, Box 445, Dept. 827, Huntington Station, New York

PILES

Successfully corrected or no cost! New painless, low cost home treatment perfected by RECTAL SPECIALISTS helps many. Send for FREE trial offer. No obligation.

DR. MOLZAHN'S CLINIC, Dept. A-14, Box 135, McCook, Neb.

SMART SIMULATED

DIAMOND RINGS

$1.95 each or both for **$2.95**

You will love to wear these beautiful Engagement and Wedding rings, set with sparkling simulated diamonds, a perfect reproduction of genuine diamond rings. You may have the rings in yellow Gold-Plate or Sterling Silver.

Send No Money

Just send name, address and ring size. Pay Postman on delivery plus 20% Federal Tax and postage charges.

CLARK RING CO., Dept. 535, Box 5151, Chicago

NOW HANDICAP RACES THIS EASY WAY

Successfully used for over 30 years. Uncle Joe's Method eliminates guesswork . . . Uncovers long shots as often as favorites. Easy-to-use reference tables equalize speed and distances at all tracks. Send no money . . . just name and address. When book arrives pay postman only $1.95 plus postage.

Satisfaction guaranteed. **UNCLE JOE McGRATH**
Dept. 17-E 215 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 1, Ill.

"Let's have a light, Olsen. I think we've got them both."

It was some time before Ryle Partridge's breathing apparatus got back to normal, but Wild Bill had never been a patient man. He didn't wait. He took big Ed Dalquist into his private office first, and from the sounds that came through the wall, Partridge was right down glad he wasn't the bull gang boss. Then Wild Bill brought Dalquist out and took Yager in. They weren't gone long and when they came out again, Wild Bill wore a Powder River smile—a foot deep and a mile wide.

He turned the smile toward the night watchman. "You solved it, Ryle, by damned if you didn't. Yager has just made a willing confession." Partridge looked at Yager's face and wondered what it would have looked like if Yager's confession hadn't been so willing. "Yup, Yager here told me where they hid the money and everything. The Moran boys were getting too close to them and their beef stealing, so they set their little trap, figgering on robbing the payroll and framing the boys at the same time.

"They were pretty sure Brad and the Morans would follow the beef, and with their reputation of wildness they would have a tough time wiggling out of it even if the sheriff never did find the loot." Wild Bill Henry shook his head. "I still don't see how you figgered it out, Ryle, damned if I do."

Partridge didn't bother to explain, it was too much work just trying to breathe.

America finds a new, easy way to save

OUT OF the war has come a great lesson in thrift—the success of the Payroll Savings Plan.

Under this Plan, during the war, millions of wage earners set aside billions of dollars for War Bonds through "painless" weekly pay deductions.

Under it today, millions more continue to use its easy deductions to buy U. S. Savings Bonds . . . to put away the money for new homes, new cars, new appliances.

SUGGESTION: Why not let this *new, easy way to save* help *you* save too?

Weekly Savings	SAVINGS AND INTEREST ACCUMULATED	
	In 1 Year	In 10 Years
$ 3.75	$195.00	$2,163.45
6.25	325.00	3,607.54
7.50	390.00	4,329.02
9.38	487.76	5,416.97
12.50	650.00	7,217.20
15.00	780.00	8,660.42
18.75	975.00	10,828.74

Savings chart. Plan above shows how even modest weekly savings can grow big. Moral: Join your Payroll Savings Plan next payday.

Out of pay—into nest eggs! A wage earner can choose his own figure, have it deducted regularly from earnings under Payroll Savings Plan.

SAVE THE EASY WAY...
BUY YOUR BONDS THROUGH PAYROLL SAVINGS

Contributed by this magazine in co-operation with the Magazine Publishers of America as a public service.

A PUBLIC SERVICE PROJECT
The Advertising Council

Men! Ladies! Here's THE JACKET You've Wanted At a Sensational Saving!

Ladies' Only $3.95

Special Combination Offer, Both for Only $7.95

Men's only $4.95

Hurry! Quantities Are Limited

LADIES'—You'll Love It!

Take this jacket for carefree ease—and for that certain poise which being "in the know" on style gives you! That new low hipline is a "flash" from the fashion front. Perky shoulders! Suave yoke! You will adore its smart distinctive lines . . . you will always enjoy its caressing warmth. It's tailored of favorite Spun-Rite, justly popular for its wear . . . for its beauty! It will be your prop and mainstay, season in, season out. Select yours from one of these seasons latest shades: Camel Tan or Liberty Red. Sizes 12 to 20.

MEN'S — Ideal for Sports-Leisure

Here's a sturdy "he-man's" jacket of a thousand and one uses that will keep pace with the fastest tempo of your busy day. Cut for real comfort—of "Spun-Rite"—magically flexible, smoothly tailored and colorful as well as warm. Snappy yoked back. Harmonizing buttons for looks and wear. Grand, deep, saddlepockets. Seamed sides—so stride along as you will. You'll live in it from dawn 'til night. Choose Camel Tan with the following choice of harmonizing colors: Forest Green or Luggage Brown. Check your size from 34 to 50 on the order coupon below.

Ladies! Men! Here's the Jacket "buy" you've been waiting for. Here's quality, style, comfort and durability all combined in one to give you the finest, smartest jacket you'll find anywhere, regardless of price. And when you order the two together — one lady's and one man's jacket— you get two jackets for only $7.95.

Save 95c! Everyone — wife and husband, girl-friend and beau will want to order matching jackets in combination on this special bargain offer. You SEND NO MONEY! We'll ship C.O.D. plus a few cents postage. If you don't agree this is the greatest Jacket Bargain you've ever seen for the price, return it within 10 days and your money will be cheerfully refunded.

SEND NO MONEY

Just Fill Out and Mail This Handy Order Coupon Today

ILLINOIS MERCHANDISE MART, Dept. 1886-H
1227 Loyola Ave., CHICAGO 26, ILL.

Gentlemen: Send me the SPUN-RITE Jackets indicated below C.O.D. I must be fully satisfied with my purchase or will return within 10 days for refund.

Name ..... Please

Address ..... write

City ..... State ..... plainly

LADY'S JACKET Sale Price $3.95	Camel Tan	Liberty Red
Check color wanted		

Combination Price for 1 Man's & 1 Lady's Jacket Both only $7.95

MEN'S JACKET Sale Price $4.95	Camel Tan with these colors	Luggage Brown	Forest Green
Check color wanted			

CHECK SIZES WANTED 44☐, 46☐, 48☐, 50☐
LADY'S 12☐, 14☐, 16☐, 18☐, 20☐ MAN'S 36☐, 38☐, 40☐, 42☐

MY TOTAL PURCHASE AMOUNTS TO: $.....C. O. D.